



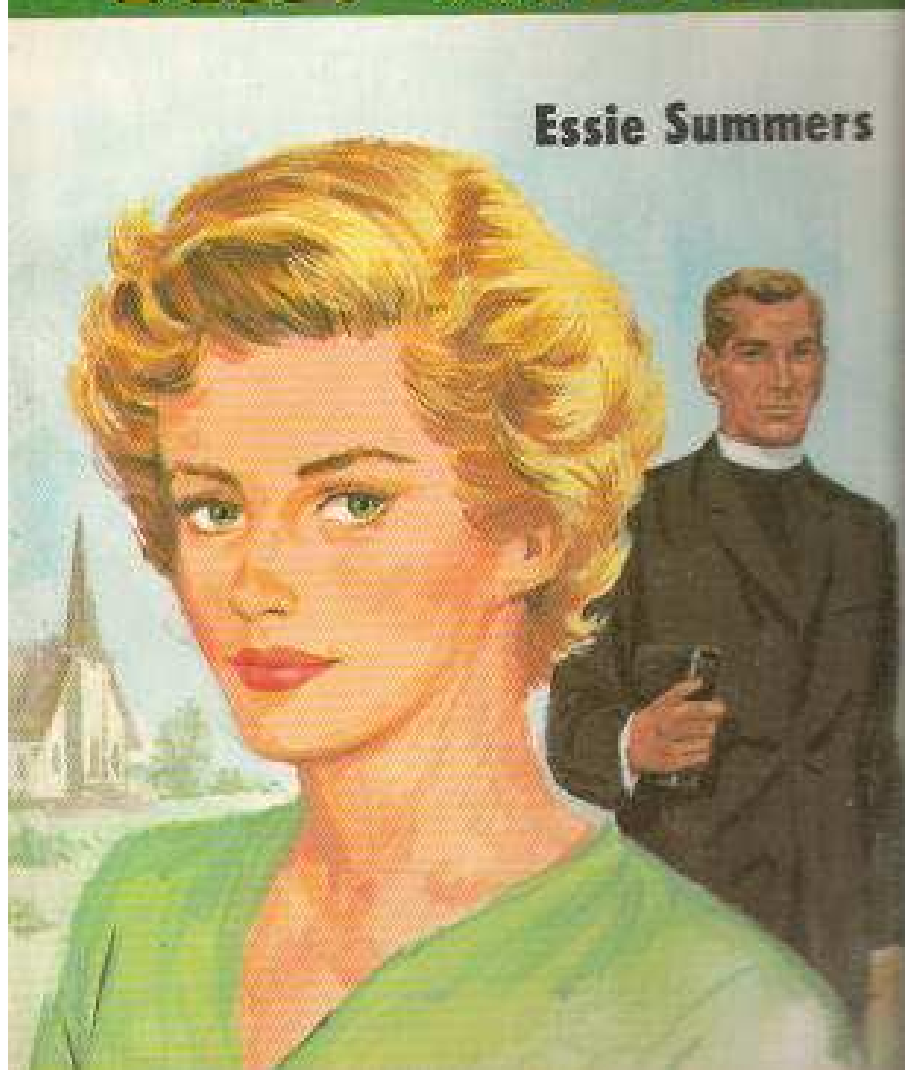
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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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SWEET ARE THE WAYS

Essie Summers



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It was love at first sight for Reverend Dougal MacNab when he met Elspeth Cameron and he lost no time in trying to persuade her to marry him. Elspeth, however, was convinced she would never make a suitable wife for a minister. Dougal didn't agree -- but he didn't know of the scandal that lay like a shadow over her past.

To
my husband,
the Reverend Bill Flett,
and to the readers all over the world
who have asked for a story, about a minister

CHAPTER ONE

ELSPETH felt her heels were tapping out a song of praise as she hurried along the busy Christchurch street. It would never do to be late the morning you were going to give in your notice.

This was not so much a red-letter day as a milestone day. Something she had dreamed of for so long, but there had seemed to be no end to her responsibilities. Now she had none . . . she was gloriously free to pursue her own career.

Nobody needed her presence in the flat, nobody needed her weekly wage. She was the owner of a country cottage, a garden ... oh, what bliss after a row of pot-plants. She had her car for access to Dunedin and enough of a bank balance to keep her going till her third book was written and published. Besides which, with only herself to keep, her newspaper articles, plus short stories, would keep the wolf from the door.

Paul could keep the flat on till he was married. She'd pay the rent till then, that would help him. He'd need all his money till then. At the back of Elspeth's mind was the unacknowledged wish that Paul might act out of character for once and insist he paid it himself. But he wouldn't, money melted with Paul.

Once lately, when she'd remonstrated at his expensive tastes he'd said: "All right for you to talk — you've never wanted to go gay!"

For once Elspeth had fired up. "Paul, I may be your aunt, but it's a matter of relationship, not of year's. I'm only five years elder. I didn't have much chance of going gay, did I? I may not have wanted the parties, the expensive snow sports equipment and weekends, the constant dining-out that seems necessary to you, but I would have liked my freedom, would have liked to have been able to travel, to write of some place other than New Zealand."

Paul had laughed. "Oh, rot! You're a home-loving body, Elspeth, and you know it. Besides, you've been lucky. Just imagine having a super job and a side line that pays really well. I wouldn't mind if I earned the money you do!"

That stung. Elspeth said, much more hotly than ever Paul had heard her speak, "Don't call it luck! I've had to get up at five in the morning, and sometimes write till midnight, to get two novels written while holding down a taxing job. It isn't luck. It's sheer hard labor! Besides, Paul, I *needed* a man's wage. Helping with your higher education, paying for Mother's massage, poor darling, keeping this flat going. I've had a man's responsibility all these years and I've not grizzled about it either ... till now. I've no intention of becoming a doormat, Paul. And fair's fair!"

Paul had ruffled her hair, said laughingly, "you look so sweet when you get mad, Elspeth. You really ought to do it more often. You don't look half so much the maiden aunt then. Most of the time you're far, far too angelic . . . that's why we all impose on you." And he had gone off whistling.

But he had said too much. *Maiden aunt*. At twenty-six you didn't feel a maiden aunt. If that was the way Paul's set regarded her, she'd better cut free. Now she was doing just that.

Odd how things happened. If Paul hadn't said just that, she wouldn't have taken her holidays then. But she'd felt she must get away. In her meanderings, stopping just where she fancied, she had come at last to the country pub at Fair-acre Valley. How fortunate she'd stayed a day or two, just wandering those leafy lanes, had known a desire to climb Candy Hill and, seeking for access to it, had cut round behind the Manse and found the cottage.

It wasn't a period piece by any means. Stripped of the rosy dreams with which she had endowed it while travelling up the two hundred

odd miles back to Christchurch, it was just a shearers' cottage, leaning up against an old stone stable, relic of the days when the Manse had been one of the old homesteads.

After that it had belonged to one Martha Moore, who, for the sake of occupying the old cottage, had acted as caretaker to the church. Now she was dead and the Manse stewards had decided to sell it. If it didn't sell they'd pull it down and sell the land to a farmer whose property adjoined it. That explained why they were asking so little for it. Houses were hard to sell in Fair-acre Valley. There were no industries, just farms and a handful of necessary shops.

Sheer joy lay ahead. That is, except for having to tell Alexander Hoodman she would be leaving them. But for his backing all these years, his confidence that she would reach the top as an advertising copywriter, she'd never have made it.

Elspeth turned in at the staff door of the huge drapery concern, went to her own office. Her staff of three were already there, eager to hear about her holiday. Once that had been the goal of Elspeth's life ... to have an office of her own, not just a desk in the outer one.

Her eyes swept round. It seemed strange that the office looked so much the same, the only difference that the wall- vase now held violets where it had held winter-sweet when she left on vacation.

Yes, it was almost spring . . . and some day, along the banks of the tiny stream that ran just outside her back garden, on its way to join the Taieri River, she would plant irises. She must be there before spring was over.

"The Old Man wants you right away, Elspeth," said Greta Morgan, her first assistant. "Some big new idea, I shouldn't wonder. He's in his pep-up mood."

Elsbeth picked up her pad and went quickly. She had always loved Alexander Hoodman's big enthusiasms, his boyishness, his big-heartedness. He wasn't soft, in fact he was the robust, rather blustering type of employer, but it hid a heart of gold. No doubt he'd got a new trade-catching idea and would be all impatience to impart it.

"Ah, here you are," he said. "Good morning. My word, your holiday *has* put a sparkle in your eye . . . splendid. Have a good time? Get right into Central Otago ... do the lakes? Good, good, you'd get lots of colored slides. Splendid, splendid . . . you must bring them up some time. Adelaide was born there, you know, right in the back country. Still got the mountains in her blood. But sit down, Elspeth, I've got something to tell you."

She sat, her eyes wary. She hoped this new scheme wouldn't take time. She didn't want to stay on any longer than necessary. Yet it would be hard to dampen his enthusiasm if he'd evolved something he particularly wanted her to manage.

He reached into a drawer, took out an envelope, threw it across his desk, sat back and beamed like a Father Christmas.

"A bonus. Your share of the success your winter catalogue brought. Yep. Unqualified success. I've had the sales analysis. Don't mind admitting I thought you were flying too high this time. In fact I said so, didn't I? But it's certainly paid dividends. Go on, go on, what are you waiting for, lass . . . open it . . . look at it!"

She was a privileged employee, so she shook her head at his impatience, slit open the envelope, and drew out the cheque. She gasped. "Mr. Hoodman! That's more than my Christmas bonus. It's ridiculous. Far too much!"

"You deserve every penny. What's more, since I don't like impulsive gestures that mean *very* little when all's said and done, there'll be a rise in your pay packet also."

He must have wondered at the peculiar expression that crossed her face. Not quite what one would expect to see on the face of an employee who'd just received such a reward. But she subdued it immediately. You couldn't counter a gesture like this by giving notice, could you? Couldn't wipe that look of pleasure off his face. Oh, dear!

Elspeth rose to the occasion, responded in a most satisfactory manner. She'd have to make an opportunity later.

Back in the office, though she was busy, she couldn't succeed in banishing worry. It was horribly awkward.

Greta Morgan came in. "Miss Cameron, there's someone to see you. Not a traveller or a newspaper man." To Elspeth's raised eyebrows she added, "I asked him whom he represented and he said: "Just myself. Please tell Miss Cameron I'm from Fair-acre Valley and the name is MacNab."

Elspeth's color rose. She hoped this man, whoever he was, hadn't mentioned his business. It must be about the cottage.

In he came, tall, broad-shouldered, with an unusually tanned skin for so fair a man. His hair had a bleached look at the stubbly ends and his eyes were sea-blue. He looked a farmer. Then he spoke, and Elspeth added to herself: Probably went to Lincoln Agricultural College. (Snobbish thought, Elspeth Cameron, watch it.)

He held out his hand. "My name's Dougal MacNab. I had to be up in Christchurch this week and the church managers thought it a good idea if I came to see you. I was away when you were there. Ronald Drew, the session clerk told me what you were thinking of doing to the cottage and said he thought I could perhaps set things in train for you if you were keen to get some alterations done before coming to live there. It's fairly old-fashioned, but it will make a lovely home, quaint and comfortable, for what he told me you'd planned."

Elsbeth's green eyes lit up. "How very good of you. It sounds the kindly interest I'd hoped might be present in the village ... or should I say township?"

"Village," he said firmly. "They've always called it that. Relic of pioneering days."

Elsbeth said frankly, "This makes me feel most welcome. I had doubts, though I loved Fair-acre Valley on sight."

"What sort of doubts?"

"Well, I've heard that in some of our more isolated townships, a newcomer remains that way for twenty years or more."

"That can be so. But it's different in your case."

' "My case?"

He grinned. "A lot of the women feel they know you already. They evidently take the magazines your short stories and poems and articles appear in. And the library, I'm told, has three copies of your book." He looked slightly embarrassed for a moment. "I've never read a thing of yours. Might as well confess it. But I will now."

Elsbeth gave a chuckle. "Be careful of what you might be letting yourself in for, Mr. MacNab. I write mainly love stories."

His eyes met hers squarely. "Well, I don't know that I've anything against love."

For some inexplicable reason that confused her. Heavens, anyone would think she was sixteen! She looked down on her papers, shuffled them, and was glad when her house telephone rang so she was saved the necessity of replying.

She listened, said, "Mr. Montrose? Ask him if he can wait, say five minutes. If not perhaps he could come back. Thank you."

She replaced the receiver and was immediately conscious that Dougal MacNab had been studying her. She'd wondered what he'd see. Someone well past her teens . . . with hair neither golden nor brown. A line of freckles across her nose, tall, not a frilly type. Yes, that would be his summing-up, no doubt.

How was she to know he was thinking he liked the way her hair waved back from her broad forehead, that he liked those short straight lashes and the curve of her mouth? And that, as he had a fine appreciation of most things, he liked her long, lovely legs. They were in full view as she swung sideways and tilted her chair to pick up her phone.

He said, "I realize we can't talk it out in the firm's time. I mustn't hold up your work. I'm busy at lunch-time, unfortunately—I've come to do some radio and television talks, which means I'm meeting one of the personalities for lunch to talk over a live interview for this afternoon. How about dinner tonight? Could you make it?"

Elsbeth knew she could. But Nigel Montrose was waiting in the outer office and as this was his first day back after two weeks away at his head office in Auckland he'd expect her to be free for him.

She said, "How long are you here for, Mr. MacNab?"

"Till the day after tomorrow. I want to pay a call at Lincoln College on the way home."

Elspeth decided she was practically clairvoyant. She'd tabbed this man very neatly. "Then any chance of making it tomorrow night? I've a tentative arrangement for tonight."

"Yes. That will suit nicely. I'll be able to advise you on a local man who'd be able to draw up plans as good as any architect's." His lips twitched. "He ought to. His name is Christopher Wren."

Elspeth's laugh coincided with his. "This is wonderful! I'm roughing out an article on how many people carry world famous names. I've got Alexander Fleming, two David Livingstones, a Grace Darling, a Winston Churchill . . . and now Christopher Wren." She jotted it down.

She looked up at him. "Mr. MacNab, as I show you out, please don't mention anything that would give away why you're here. It so happens I've not given in my notice yet. I—I tried to this morning, but it was most awkward. I've a wonderful boss ... but before I could get to him he sent for me and gave me a huge bonus for a catalogue I put out. I—I didn't know what to do."

Dougal MacNab's laugh was spontaneous and genuinely amused. It carried right into the outer office where Nigel Montrose was waiting, not patiently. Who the dickens was Elspeth entertaining?

Dougal MacNab sobered. "I can see it has its problems. Like looking a gift horse in the mouth."

Elspeth bit her lip. "He gave me a rise too."

They both chuckled then, though Elspeth ruefully. She added: "I'll have to give back the bonus."

"Why? It was a reward for services already rendered, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But it might have been meant as an encouragement too. I do wish I'd got in first. I almost wrote him from Dunedin, but I thought he'd prefer to hear it direct from me."

Dougal MacNab said seriously: "If I were you, Miss Cameron, I'd go straight to him now and tell him, otherwise complication upon complication might pile up. These things do. You'll find yourself committed to some program. If a thing must be done, 'then 'twere well it were done quickly'."

"Macbeth," commented Elspeth absent-mindedly. Then she colored up. "Sorry. That sounds snooty, doesn't it? As if one wanted to flaunt knowledge. I've tried to break myself of that habit, but Dad taught us to do it. Said if we used quotations we ought to know their origins, but it can be embarrassing."

"I like it. I'm very keen on origins myself. Also roots of words."

Elspeth experienced a strange something ... a feeling of kinship? Or what? Someone who liked words too!

Suddenly she felt tinglingly alive—something she hadn't felt recently. She was on the threshold of a new life. She was cutting loose *from* the old. She would simply be Elspeth Cameron, author, in the village of Fair-acre. Not Paul's young aunt, not a daughter who'd been born to her parents late in life and had nursed a crippled mother so long. Not a career girl, immersed in commercial advertisements. Just Elspeth Cameron.

She remembered Nigel, waiting outside. She rose and went to the door with Mr. MacNab.

Nigel, exchanging small talk with Greta, looked up, saw Elspeth emerge with a perfect stranger, heard him say: "I'll call for you at six-fifteen, then," and, looking at the notebook he had in his hand, say: "Flat five, one-sixty-two Winterhill Terrace. Goodbye till then, Miss Cameron."

So Nigel came into Elspeth's office with a slight line between his dark brows. He shut the door quickly, said, "Who was that, Elspeth?"

He thought her color was high. She said, trying to be nonchalant. "Mr. MacNab from a little place on the Taieri Plains, Nigel. Do you know it . . . Fair-acre Valley?"

"No, never heard of it. Nor have I ever heard you mention this chap."

Her eyes were quite frank. "You couldn't have, I just met him this morning."

He stared. "Just met him this morning! Good lord, he must be a fast worker . . . taking you out to dinner tonight."

"Not tonight. I thought you might want to take me out tonight. Tomorrow night, he meant. Nigel, it's nothing. A bit of business I began while down there. But I couldn't discuss it, here, in Mr. Hoodman's time."

"What do you mean? If it's business, then it could be done in shop hours, couldn't it?"

"I didn't mean drapery business."

He looked at her sharply. "You mean it's to do with your writing? He didn't look a—"

"Nigel, do you mind? I don't want to be more explicit till I've seen Mr. Hoodman about it."

He laughed. "My dear Elspeth, curiouser and curiouser! Let me forestall you by saying: Lewis Carroll. You're as clear as mud. It's nothing to do with drapery but you have to tell Hoodman first. Come dean, my girl."

Elspeth said quickly: "Nigel, let me tell you tonight? I've a great whacking pile of stuff here to attend to and it really is essential I see Mr. Hoodman soon. That's why I couldn't spare Mr. MacNab much time."

Nigel smiled his rather endearingly crooked smile at her. "Well, as long as we're all getting short shrift I don't mind. Otherwise I shall suffer all day . . . pangs of jealousy."

"Not you . . . those things pass you by. Which suits me nicely. The sort of thing we agreed on. A . . . well . . . partnership that suited us both but with no deep feelings involved."

For one moment she caught a look in Nigel's eyes which disconcerted her. She must have imagined it.

He laughed. "You're quite rare, Elspeth. I know it suited you at the time—you were still a little raw—no, I won't bring up old history, but by now most women would have become possessive. The fact that you haven't is probably no compliment to me, either."

Elspeth said calmly: "Rubbish; You'd have gone for your life if I'd shown the slightest sign of becoming emotional over you. You're the perfect example of a confirmed bachelor. Now, be off, or I'll never find time for a session with Alexander. What time will you call for me?"

"Could you be ready by six? I know it's early, but I thought of taking you out into the country."

"Oh, how nice of you. Can do. Now scram."

He picked up his hat, said, "You've such a gracious way of bidding goodbye, Elspeth," and opened the door. Then he paused, looked back at her, a faintly puzzled look on his face. There was something different about her.

Elspeth stared at the advertisements in front of her. Despite all their determination not to become emotionally involved, she had an idea Nigel would take it hard. Perhaps that was why she had known, suddenly, that she must break away from Christchurch. Not that she need feel guilty, because Nigel had been as firm as she, at the start, that theirs was to be mutual companionship, no more. It was probably only that by now she'd become a habit with him.

She sighed. She had always enjoyed her job, loved describing merchandise in a way that tempted people to empty their purses, but now she longed to give rein to her imagination in the realm of fiction. She rose. She must see Alexander Hoodman now.

Despite the fact that he was dismayed at the thought of losing her, the fineness of his nature triumphed over the blow.

"I think I've anticipated this for some time, Elspeth. Ever since your first book was accepted, I've felt the time would come when you'd want to leave. When you'd want to work on your manuscripts with a morning-fresh brain, not with one weary from pounding out new ideas about the rag trade from nine till five-thirty each day. I don't blame you, but how the devil we'll fill your place, goodness only knows. You've had just that little much more inspiration than the usual copywriter. We'd better advertise right through New Zealand."

"Mr. Hoodman, is there any chance you could move Greta Morgan into my position ? I feel she could do it. To be quite candid, you could lose her if you appoint someone over her. She's twenty-three, older than I was when you first promoted me. I feel she could take responsibility. She's not had much chance to show what she can do."

He considered it, frowning, then smiled, unpursing his lips. "I believe you're right. Don't go yet, but when you do, send her to me."

Elsbeth's eyes were starry. "I know how much it will mean to her. And she's so loyal to the firm. Not a clock-watcher."

He said then, "But what an idea, your thinking I'd allow you to return the bonus! My girl, it wasn't meant as a carrot in front of the donkey. Though I'm well aware that I've always had it at the back of my mind that we ought to make it worth your while to stay with us; I felt some day some Auckland firm, even an Australian firm, might try to snaffle you. The firm will be mighty sorry to lose you—I don't know how I'll tell Mike — but we'll always be proud of the fact that we were associated and will follow your career with great interest. And you'd just better always, even when you become famous, give Adelaide a complimentary copy of your books as they come."

He got up, took a turn or two about the room, came back, looked down on her, said gruffly, "How's Nigel Montrose going to take this? Have you told him?"

"No. He was in this morning. I'm telling him tonight. But we said from the start that our . . . association . . . was to be — oh, how can I put it? Not a clinging one."

He nodded. "Hasn't it got out of hand at all?"

"No, not really, Mr. Hoodman—though I've wondered a little lately if Nigel—er—"

He nodded again. "I've thought so, too. He's a good fellow. Don't you think you'll miss him? Haven't you changed at all yourself?"

As she didn't answer he said suddenly, rather fiercely: "Not still hankering after that fellow Perry, are you? Not worth a backward glance, that fellow. Pah!"

She shook her head instantly. "No. Truly. Sometimes I've felt a little nostalgic for—for what I used to feel for him—a sort of backward wish that I could recapture the old idealistic feeling. But I was too thoroughly disillusioned, Mr. Hood- man. I could never warm up those ashes, nor want to."

"Then what's wrong with Nigel Montrose?"

Her eyes were troubled. "Nothing. It's me. I know that deep down he's not the man for me, neither am I the woman for him. We could be fairly happy together. I know his world, he knows mine ... as far as my world has so far gone. But I'm not sure this has ever been the existence I want. I've lived my people's life, my nephew's life, the shop life, Nigel's. Yet back of me are generations of farming ancestors, here and in Scotland. I wouldn't say I'd never marry, but I won't take second-best."

Alexander Hoodman said: "You're right, Elspeth. Too many girls marry because they're frightened they'll be left on the shelf. A relic from the old days. It doesn't work usually. But remember that as a sex, most of us are pretty faulty. It's not fair to us to look for an ideal man that doesn't exist."

"I realize the danger in that. Only there has to be—something. Something drawing and impelling. And as far as Nigel is concerned, there isn't."

He nodded. "I was lucky. I found Adelaide."

Elsbeth's eyes suddenly glimmered with tears. "I won't find it easy to leave. You've been more than just a good boss to me. But for you I might have *come* out of—that old trouble—much more hurt than I was. I'll never forget it."

Alexander Hoodman patted her shoulder. "There, there. I was glad to do it. What's the use of making money if you can't do things like that! I'm only sorry it ever happened to you—though there need never have been any aftermath of regret if that young fool Perry hadn't let you down over it. Well, send Miss Morgan to me."

Elsbeth turned at the door. "Mr. Hoodman, would you ask her not to say anything to anyone here till I tell Nigel tonight. He's a right to hear it from me first and you know how news flies round the departments. He might be in with some hosiery lines and the buyer might tell him."

"Yes, quite right. I'll tell her to say nowt until tomorrow."

Elsbeth wished Nigel were not so obviously trying to make it a special evening. It was a delightful night for early spring, with no cold east wind. They went spinning down the Main South Road till they came to the White House by the Selwyn River, to a garden full of the promise of spring, with birds whistling in the copse outside, and beyond, westward, the sun setting over the Southern Alps, patching the snow-slopes with coral and flame and saffron, and a clear, golden-green arch over the mountains beneath a bank of rolled-up cloud.

"A nor' west arch," said Nigel, looking out of the window. "See how it's blowing the clouds up away from the peaks. If we get a bit of this, it will hasten spring and bring on summer. We could do with a few hot nor-westers to dry things out."

Elsbeth thought, attacking her pink-sliced ham, that was always nicer here than anywhere else, that she might see the first heralds of spring in Christchurch but she was going to be in Otago for the summer. Mr. Hoodman had been most understanding. After his talk with Greta he had sent for her and told her she could, be away in three weeks. The very thought of it was sending a singing through her pulses.

Nigel said accusingly: "I don't believe you've heard a word. You aren't with me at all."

Elsbeth said hurriedly, "I'm sorry, Nigel! You know I'm a dreamer. Did you ever taste such ham? And this salad is a feast for the eye as well as for the palate."

She would tell him as they drove home in the dusk. But he was disposed to linger.

"We're going for a walk amongst those trees. Didn't you hear that thrush whistling? We've an appointment with him. They're beginning their mating calls."

A shiver of apprehension ran through Elsbeth. Till she and Nigel had come together, he'd had no interest in the birds and beast of the wilds. But lately he seemed quite keen, was losing his air of supreme sophistication. She liked him the better for it. . . but what if he had purposely set himself out to like the things she liked? She didn't want to hurt him.

The trees were English ones, just greening, and last year's leaves were rusty under their feet. Now and then an acorn crunched.

The trees closed round them, leaving them in a world where only the faint hum of traffic on the main road reminded them that there was anything here but vast plantations of pine and blue-gum on the plains that stretched sixty miles to the great spine of mountains on the

horizon. Between two sycamores in a patch of pale green sky glittered the evening star.

Nigel stopped her from going further, turned her to him, folded her against him and kissed her.

He had kissed her before of course, lightly, undemandingly, but never like this.

He lifted his mouth from hers, looked down on her with a look that was actually tender, not cynical, and said, "We've come to this very gradually, haven't we, Elspeth? Through friendship to love. Will you marry me?"

Elspeth bit her lip. She'd waited too long. She ought to have told him as they drove, but the traffic had been hectic. And she'd thought to work on the principle of 'give a man a meal first.' She felt herself shake because she was going to hurt him.

"Nigel, I'm sorry . . . but I'm afraid it just stayed friendship with me. I hoped we'd be able to keep it as we had it at the start. Just partners. We agreed to that . . ."

He looked down on her gravely, "Elspeth, we can't hold the tide back. Even King Canute couldn't. And no relationship stays still."

She said, unhappily, "No, but—"

He interrupted, "I know what it is—we started this thing on a friendly footing. We were — oh, so sensible. So wary. And you'd been disillusioned and wanted nothing else. What is it, Elspeth? Is that old hurt still active? Or do you feel that because we started off the way we did we can never feel anything really deep for each other? Because, if you're honest, you'll admit that you too put something into that kiss a moment ago."

Elspeth had a basic honesty that would not be denied. "Yes, but then I expect that was sex appeal."

Nigel burst out laughing. "Oh, Elspeth, Elspeth! You'll be the death of me. You still say exactly what you think, you analytical little brat. That's what comes of being a writer. And with it all you're such an innocent."

Elspeth thought: "That's not true ... I don't say exactly what pops into my mind, *now*. I used to, but all the rebuffs from Perry taught me not to.'

She shook her head. "I'm not an innocent. How could I be after all that has happened to me?"

"Oh, that! Goose! It's behind you. Elspeth what is it? Do you cling to your romantic . . . too-romantic ideas? You think because I wasn't swept off my feet at first that I can't love you deeply now?"

"No, it's not that. It's more that I think you haven't any real need of me. Your life runs on oiled wheels. Your home, for instance, is just a little too perfect. Everything matches. Not a false note anywhere. Nothing shabby, no need for any economies, for making-do. Everything is artistic to the last degree. You've arrived. I'd like something a little more adventurous. I'm not looking for security—yet. I think a writer has to know a bit of a struggle. I have a feeling that if I married you, Nigel, I'd never write another poem. I'd be stifled with luxury. And it wouldn't be fair to you. I've a hunch that despite all your sophistication, you need a young girl, sweet and impulsive, to . . . stir you up. Someone to worship you blindly."

"Good grief!" said Nigel, genuinely startled, "Sounds horrible! Cut it out, girl. I know what I want. You. I've been tame and conventional far too long as far as you're concerned, and it seems to me you've got the idea I'd be a dull, settled husband. Heavens, girl, I've got the same

feelings any man has. I don't want just a gracious hostess, a good companion ... I want someone to share my bed as well as my board. I want—"

She stopped him with a hand over his lips. "I'm sorry, Nigel. I ought to have seen this coming. I did, a little, just before I went off for my holiday. Thought we might drift into something we'd regret later ... I've a new future carved out for myself. I—"

She was interrupted this time. "Do you mean this fellow MacNab? I thought—"

"Nigel! Don't be silly. I never saw him before today. Oh, dear, I'm trying to tell you. I didn't dream you'd start proposing. Please listen. On holiday, just cruising round in my Mini, I suddenly found my dream cottage. Not that it looks like a dream, but it will. It belongs to the Fair-acre Presbyterian Church, but they sold it to me. I'm off there in three weeks. To write. To live my own life.

"This Mr. MacNab is one of the church managers. A farmer, I suppose. He's up here on business to do with television methods . . . aerial topdressing or something. That's what I'd pick. But the management asked him to see me about some details and they seem to be kindly folk and thought they could help me get started with the alterations. That's why he came in. I gave notice to Mr. Hoodman just after that."

It didn't rest there, of course. Nigel argued against the scheme for nearly half an hour.

Finally he said, with the old twist of the lips, "I know what it is, of course—you've never really got over Perry, have you?"

A wave of salt bitterness came up from Elspeth's heart. How strange. Nobody had spoken Perry's name to her for three years, nearly four,

and today she'd had it said to her twice. The wave receded. She lifted her head and looked at Nigel, and said in the most convincing way, "I have, you know; I've been over him a long time since. Nigel, I was young and vulnerable . . . and when Perry failed me, I felt the bottom had dropped out of my world. The young Elspeth *did* love him. This one doesn't. I could never love Perry again, but I wouldn't offer any man second-best. Unless I some day feel for someone as I once felt for Perry, I wouldn't do him the injustice of marrying him. Nigel, take me home. I'd feel much worse about this if I didn't think that some day, you, too, will meet someone you'll love a good deal more than you think you love me. We aren't quite right for each other."

As they parted at the gate Nigel asked could they have a farewell night together. Elspeth said no. She looked up at him frankly. "We can't—now—go back to our former footing. It would be strained and unnatural. I—I don't want you following me up to Fair-acre. I'm cutting free from the old life. I want it that way, please. I'm going to be frightfully depressed over this, I had thought we could have kept it light. But we couldn't."

Suddenly he smiled his crooked smile at her, leaned forward, pinched her chin, said, "Elspeth, don't make yourself unhappy over this. You've been a grand little pal. And you were quite above board. You've nothing to reproach yourself with. I was the one who let the situation get out of hand. Don't lie awake mulling over this. Go to bed and sleep. And — best of luck in the new life. Goodbye."

Despite his words Elspeth did not sleep well.

CHAPTER TWO

SHE was glad she was going out with this Dougal MacNab the next night. It was the right name for the Scottish province of New Zealand. There would be many Scots names there. He belonged to the new life ahead of her. He'd bring no complications into it. A good, solid son of the soil.

She took a quick shower on reaching home, left the flat door ajar in case he came early. Paul was still in Marlborough. She ought to have asked Mr. MacNab where they were going, it was hard to know what to wear.

She decided on her black and green, as something a little dressed up but not too much. It was slim-fitting and relieved by a scarf collar of emerald green in filmy ninon, clasped at the throat with a silver brooch. She brushed her hair till it shone, clasped a *paua* shell necklet linked with silver, at her throat, put on a bracelet and earrings of the same. They gleamed at her from her mirror, in the lovely blue-greens of the sea, iridescent, ever-changing, bringing up the green of her eyes.

She heard a step in the hall, called out, "Come in Mr. MacNab," walked into the living room to greet him and stopped dead.

She had her gaze riveted below his chin. He was wearing a clerical stock and collar.

She said accusingly: "You're a minister!"

He chuckled. "Of course. But you'd know that."

"How should I? I thought you looked a farmer."

He chuckled again. "I was brought up on a farm. I suppose the hayseed look sticks. When you interviewed the session clerk did he not mention my name? I'm the minister of St. Enoch's."

"He didn't. He simply referred to you as the minister. He made it sound faintly like meenister."

"That's so. He does. Pioneer accents linger." He looked at her curiously. "You sound—and look—quite put out. You've got nothing against ministers have you?"

Her answer surprised him. "Yes, I have."

She expected him to look annoyed, insulted. Instead his lips twitched. "That's interesting. Would you think me pompous if I said that perhaps that's because you've not known many?"

Her voice was taut. "I have. Intimately. I knew one too many."

The grin left his lips. He realized she was in deadly earnest.

"I wouldn't have picked you to be the type to judge the whole breed on the strength of one you didn't like. It's neither logical nor Christian."

She made a waving-away gesture with one hand. "I don't judge all ministers as the same. But I prefer them in the pulpit, not in *my* life, thank you."

He said, with every appearance of interest, "Then you do still go to church?"

That was cunning, she thought, taking an argument away from the personal. But she answered it, "I go to church simply and solely to worship. But I don't get embroiled."

"To go to church to worship is probably the best reason of all. It boils down to going to church to meet God, doesn't it? Much better than going for a feast of music, or because it's the done thing, or as sermon-taster. My car's at the gate. Where's your coat?"

As she made no move, he added: "Come on, come on, you don't want me to go back to say to my managers, 'She wouldn't discuss anything with me because she doesn't like ministers,' do you? They would think you odd. Is this your coat here? I'll hold it for you."

Automatically Elspeth held out her arms, was assisted into it. He picked up her bag, her gloves, put his hand under her elbow, and Elspeth found herself sitting in his Vauxhall before she had time to think up any more objections.

He continued cheerfully, "Actually, I'd sooner not have been wearing my collar . . . they're darned uncomfortable things, you know—but I've come straight from this television panel and I had to wear it for that."

Elspeth was still recovering, and only managed an, "Oh," which she realized a moment later might sound uninterestedly rude. She couldn't ever remember being at a loss for words before. It was just that she felt so numb. Why on earth must *she be so disappointed he was not a farmer?* It was just that she didn't want any young, single ministers in her life ever again. If she'd thought about the Manse being next to the cottage, it had been just to imagine a comfortable family man there.

He said, an undercurrent of laughter in his voice, "I'm glad you're so interested in what we were doing on this television panel. We were discussing how effective chaplaincy work really is. My particular line was as chaplain to the Navy."

Elsbeth knew she must rouse herself to small talk, but before she could he continued smoothly on: "I knew that would get you . . . dying to know where, eh? Honolulu . . . Pearl Harbour . . . Malaya . . . right round Australia. Then down with the weather ships when they were on duty in the Antarctic." He stopped, added, "But I wish you wouldn't interrupt all the time. It puts a fellow off."

Elsbeth couldn't help it. A splutter of laughter escaped her.

He had the nerve to pat her knee. "Much, much better. I was beginning to feel more chilly than ever at McMurdo Sound. Now a really good dinner will thaw you completely."

He slid expertly into a parking place by the river. Elsbeth was surprised when he turned her in at the Clarendon. She hadn't thought a minister's purse would stretch to that.

"Television pays well," said Dougal MacNab's voice most suavely.

She looked up at him. The sea-blue eyes were dancing.

Exasperated, she said, "People who can read one's thoughts aren't always the most comfortable companions."

"I took psychology as well as ethics, you see," he said meekly, "so I can't help it. And you haven't the knack, of hiding your feelings, have you?"

She said stiffly, "I don't think that's meant to be a compliment. It makes me feel a ninny-hammer."

"A what?"

"A ninny-hammer. You can work that one out for yourself since you think you're so astute."

"I'll lay you ten to one you've been reading one of Georgette Heyer's historical romances. Regency period."

This time he really did surprise her. "Well, how on earth could you know?"

"My sister was the same. A born mimic—unconsciously. We could almost always tell what Jeannie had been reading. If it was Jeffery Farnol she'd call me a flash cull; if it was D. K. Broster she'd have a Scots accent you could cut with a knife; if it was eighteenth-century stuff, she'd be saying 'pon rep' and 'lud' till she nearly drove us mad."

"Then the less you have to do with me when I come to Fair-acre the better. I do the same. I'd get on your nerves."

"Jeannie was quick at repartee too. But it only hid her heart of gold."

"You'd better not start looking for my heart of gold .. began Elspeth, then laughter overcame her.

"Much better for the digestion," said Dougal MacNab.

It was an excellent dinner. Elspeth gave up trying to find fault with him, though his dog-collar gave her a long-since conquered nostalgia. How often she and Perry had sat, like this, enjoying a meal, making plans for a home, just as she and this stranger were doing now, though this wasn't to be a home for two but a cottage for a spinster. Fiercely her mind blue-pencilled that. A cottage for an author sounded much better.

They retired to the lounge and the Reverend Mr. MacNab produced a small sketch-book, flicking over some used pages that Elspeth thought looked decidedly interesting, though she knew very little about art. Following on the lines of their conversation, he began to draw in swift, confident lines.

He said to her look of surprise, "I was in the building trade before I entered Knox College."

Beneath his pencil Elspeth saw her dream cottage take place. She had thawed considerably by now and was rather ashamed that she had said what she had. How much better it would have been to have said nothing. He wasn't likely to mean anything in her life. He'd just be a neighbor.

She told him that in the first place she'd been attracted by the old stone stable that leaned up against the wooden walls of the cottage.

He nodded. "I've always thought it could be converted into charming living-quarters. There's a place at Queens- town . . . did you notice it when you went to Lake Wakatipu . . . right by the lake as you go in? Yes, that type of thing. Only as this is Oamaru stone, not rock, it would need to be white-washed."

Elspeth caught on, "Yes, with Cotswold green sills and a lipstick-red door and hollyhocks and clematis growing over it."

She watched, fascinated, as under his pencil, hollyhocks appeared, rambler roses, creepers. In went the gnarled old willow at one side, that had once been pollarded but had made a valiant effort in succeeding years to recapture its old height.

"There's no glass in those dormer windows upstairs, but of course it could be replaced. Your best bet there would be if you could pick up some second-hand lattice windows. The effect would be charming. Some of the tiles on the roof want replacing, but the floors are sound. There's a huge old fireplace that could be built-in a little. Yes, it's unusual to have a fireplace in a stable, but that part of it was used as quarters for the men when the cottage was full, in the days when the Manse was Fair-acre Homestead. Of course this will cost money. How far do you want to go now?"

Elsbeth considered it. "I've got a reasonable bank balance, there's that bonus I told you of—I'd better give priority to the time-saving things that will free me for as many hours per day on my writing as I can, since I'll be dependent upon my pen now. I'd better concentrate on the actual cottage first. Later I'll restore the stable. I mean make it over. I'll turf out that ghastly old coal range and have an up-to-the-minute electric one. The sink must go, it looks about a hundred years old. I'll get a plumber to put in one of those new units with drawers and cupboards. I'll have the bathroom completely done up. The wash-basin's cracked anyway, so I'll get a vanity table type for there, and a new bath, in color. Azure blue, I think. And I'll have the floor done with lion tiles. That will do for a start. I want to get the feel of it before redecorating the lounge or the sitting-room or whatever Martha Moore called it."

Dougal MacNab grinned." She called it the parlor. And she always called the wash-house and dairy 'out-Dye.' And in a village like ours the names stick. We're very conservative. For instance, in the early days, I think ours was the last parish in Otago to relinquish the tuning-fork for the worldliness of the organ. And we still call the church officer the beadle."

He looked at Elspeth Cameron. She'd forgotten to be cynical and tough. She looked about twenty, eager-eyed and laughing-mouthed.

She said, "So the Manse was the homestead. Have they modernized it for you?"

"Yes, fairly well. They supplied the timber, I did the work. It's a bit big to run, of course, but it has a certain charm and in any case we need a fair bit of space, with two children, a boy and a girl, and my old uncle, the Reverend Timothy MacMaster, lives with us too."

Elsbeth felt exactly as if she had missed a step in the dark. Jolted. She hadn't dreamed he was married. But why not? He must be over thirty.

Perhaps it was because he'd asked her out to dinner. She had an idea that a married clergyman wouldn't. Though perhaps that was silly. After all, his managers had asked him to see her and discuss things.

She was annoyed to find she was breathing unevenly. How ridiculous. She strove to sound natural. "I hadn't realized you were married and had a family. How old are the children, and what are their names?"

"Jo-anne and Robbie. Jo-anne is four and Robbie seven. But they aren't mine. I'm not married. Their parents were killed in an accident on Banks Peninsula eighteen months ago. Their mother was my sister Jeannie. Jean and Scott were killed instantly. But we make out all right. I've got a good housekeeper."

The green eyes with the tawny flecks met his. "Believe me, I'm *very* sorry. I know how hard that is to take. I had much the same. In our case it was my brother and his wife and my father who were killed. Mother was injured, more or less permanently, though she lived many years. We brought up my nephew, Paul."

The blue eyes held hers, they were very serious. "Are you bringing him to Fair-acre? There's a good school and the school bus takes the older children to Taieri High School— a very good one. In Mosgiel."

Elsbeth laughed. "Paul is twenty-one. I was only five when he was born. Mother and father had thought their family—a son and daughter—was complete when suddenly I happened along. They were grown-up. My sister, Rebecca, Jives in Oamaru. I might mention that Paul does not call me Auntie!"

She was chattering to cover up the second strong feeling that had attacked her. Relief. Like after all managing to grab the banister as you fell. Heavens, what was she thinking?

She must be mad. Gone were the years of succumbing to first impressions. Anyway, even if—against her will—she liked this man, she must never again become involved with anyone whose calling was in the church. Old scandals never really died.

He said, holding her eyes, "Then to some extent, we have experienced the same things."

She felt herself drawing away, shrinking within herself.

Her voice was purposely cold. "In that one thing, perhaps. But there are things in my life a minister would hardly have experienced." (Only fair, even at this stage, to warn him.)

The blue eyes danced. "Hardly. Wrong sex."

Elsbeth would not smile back. She bent to her handbag, took out her handkerchief, blew her nose unnecessarily and with great gusto.

He looked at his watch and said: "I've got seats for a film, on the off-chance we'd be finished soon enough. I knew you wouldn't have seen this. It's a first night."

As they crossed the foyer of the theatre, Elspeth saw someone rise from a couch where he had been sitting with his wife. Alexander Hoodman! His wife too, when she saw who it was.

Alexander Hoodman was grinning. That would be because he had noticed the clerical collar. She introduced Dougal, hoping her color stayed down. Her chief would say nothing now, but he certainly would tomorrow. He'd chuckle and say, "Another Minister, eh?"

Dougal MacNab was easy in his manner, said, "Yes, I'm from Fair-acre Valley. I rather expect you to look on me with a jaundiced eye since Fair-acre's gain is Hoodman's loss. Our village is all of a twitter. We feel the famous are coming amongst us."

Elspeth sighed. "Famous! I may not be that—even in the future. I may not even make enough to keep myself. You'll probably see me serving out rolls of print in the village store."

Adelaide Hoodman shook her head. "Not you, Elspeth." She turned to the Reverend Mr. MacNab. "Be kind to her in your village, Mr. MacNab, don't let her be too lonely. She deserves the best."

It was most unexpected, and Elspeth went hot.

Dougal MacNab's mouth twitched. "I'm sure she does, in spite of all she's trying to tell me to the contrary. And as the Manse is right next door to the cottage she is buying, I can assure you I'll see to it personally that she's not lonely."

Elspeth lost sight of all her doubts in the film. What a blessing this sort of entertainment was, cutting talking down to a minimum. If he proposed supper somewhere she was going to plead tiredness.

But he took her straight to the car. As they drove home they arranged that he should contact Christopher Wren right away, tell him what Elspeth wanted doing, do any preliminary demolition and be ready to start on the new designing when she arrived.

Elspeth named a date, asked him to book her in at the pub—she'd stay there till the basic alterations were done. She couldn't face being without a bath or stove.

Her flat was on the ground floor. She took out her key, then before inserting it ,said, holding out her hand, "Thank you for a most pleasant evening, Mr. MacNab. I'll see you in a month's time."

He said quietly, "I won't say good night till I've lit up for you, Miss Cameron. I wouldn't allow any girl to go into a dark house alone."

She said, a little impatiently, "I can assure you I often do. Paul is rarely in before me."

"But it's not necessary when you have an escort."

She opened the door, switched on the hall light herself. He walked past her. into the living-room, switched on that light and crossing to the hearth, clicked on the light of the standard lamp by the couch. He looked down, said, "Ah, the fire's set," and actually had the effrontery to put his hand in his pocket, fumble for matches and before she could object, added: "You *are* going to be hospitable and ask me for supper, I suppose?"

She held herself erect, said crisply, "Sorry, Mr. MacNab, it probably offends the notions of Fair-acre Valley hospitality, but it so happens I don't entertain men as late as this when I'm quite alone in the flat."

Sheer surprise held him silent for a moment, then he laughed, "My dear girl, how absolutely Victorian. And what a change to be regarded as a wolf. I'm usually thought ultra- respectable."

She shrugged. "You know the Victorians had something. I like their furniture," she waved at the beautifully polished mahogany of the room, "and I like their ideas. I think it's quite a good thing for a girl living alone to conform to them."

He said slowly, drawing a pipe out of his pocket but making no move to light it, "I find you astounding. I didn't think modern girls worried about being talked about."

"It could be that I might worry lest you were talked about. I've known ministers who were extremely careful about their reputations." She paused, added: "And it's most unpleasant to be the butt of gossip. *I know*. So it's goodnight, Mr. MacNab."

He put the pipe back, smiled, said, "You'll find us very simple, down-to-earth people at Fair-acre. They're pretty good at summing up character, Elspeth Cameron. You won't find yourself talked about down there. Goodnight."

She said, "Goodnight. I hope you have a pleasant journey home tomorrow."

"I'm not going all the way. I'm not leaving till afternoon—I'm staying with an uncle—then I'm going to spend the night at Lincoln College. I've a friend who's a lecturer there."

Elsbeth let herself down into a chair after she'd seen him out, then bent forward and lit the fire, late and all as it was. She made herself tea, cut sandwiches, and had them by the fire.

In some ways it had been a stimulating evening. Had she not had the memory of Perry at the back of her mind she might have fully enjoyed it, not being so snubbing and contradictory, but some sense of preserving herself against future hurt had made her act so. She would never again leave herself open to censure from a man of the cloth.

Now she wanted to put all thoughts of that out of her mind and dwell on a future she was certain would be blissful. Her eye travelled lovingly round the room, lingered on each antique so carefully hunted down and purchased, the one extravagance she had allowed herself ... the acquiring of good furniture. For that she had denied herself many a play, even some holidays. It would so enhance that cottage when she had it reconstructed to her liking. She'd have her little car for easy access to town, to plays, the ballet, films, lectures ... she sat on in a happy daze, planning, planning . . .

Suddenly she stiffened. What was that? The sound of a key turning! But—but only Paul had a key! She stood up, heart thudding, and called out in a firm tone: "Who is that?"

Paul's voice answered her. "Only me, Elspeth. Sorry to startle you. I'm back two days early from Picton."

She knew something was wrong even before she saw him. It was in his voice, spiritless, sullen. What now?

His face was so white under his thatch of dark hair that Elspeth leapt to what she thought was the only conclusion, "Paul ... is it Patty? Has she had an accident?"

He looked at her as if it hadn't registered. Then: "No, not Patty. Not an accident, Patty doesn't know."

He came across, dropped to the couch, looked at her and said dully: "The firm sent for me. About that accident last autumn."

Elspeth stared. "The accident? But—*bat* that was over and done with ages ago. The case is closed. You admitted you were speeding a little. They apportioned the blame and the insurance company paid up. You got off with a fine. What *do you* mean? *They—they* couldn't bring you up again."

Paul looked at his hands. "Not on that count. But they could on another . . . perjury! If they want to press it. So far only Mr. Vincent and the insurance company know. You see—"

"But, Paul . . . perjury! That's serious. Didn't you admit everything? Were you driving even faster than—"

I wasn't driving at all. I said I was because you know how tough the firm are- about no one else driving their cars but their own agents. This was a chap I got to know in Invercargill and—well, he'd had his

licence cancelled for two years not long before. I knew that. I must have been mad. If it had been someone more responsible, I'd have got away with it, perhaps. But I knew it was no go, so I said I was the driver. The firm had made it plain after Jefferson had smashed his car up that if we let anyone else drive we'd lose our jobs, and to let a chap with a record for dangerous driving do it made it a dead cert. I was a fool, but I thought if I said I was driving, the insurance would pay up and there'd be no harm done."

Elsbeth was horrified, "But Paul, it was downright dishonest. How could you when Mr. Vincent has been so good to you?"

Paul looked at her almost with dislike, she thought. "Spare me the heroics, Elspeth. You've got such a black- and-white conscience you'd never understand. Plenty of people get by with these things. It was just my bad luck, getting found out. It was that fool of a chap . . . not half grateful enough that I got him out of the mess, he had one too many in a pub one night and started telling some of his pals how we'd wangled it. He was overheard by a chap who was with the insurance company."

Elsbeth said sorrowfully. "It wasn't bad luck, it was a case of cause and effect, Paul. Those things do happen when we deviate from the truth. That's why you're in this hole now."

Paul gave an impatient snort. "Look where telling the truth landed you! Your reputation suffered. You lost Perry!"

Elsbeth whitened. "I'm glad I lost Perry. *Glad*. He wasn't the man I thought he was. It- was much better, anyway, that my reputation got a little tarnished than that I'd let Mike down. He'd suffered enough as a child . . . knocked round from pillar to post. Nobody ever caring. I couldn't have lived with myself if I hadn't done what I did." She paused, and the tears came into her eyes, "oh, Paul, I don't want to preach at you, what can I do to help?"

"I don't know. Nothing, probably. Mr. Vincent wants to see you too, but with me present."

Elsbeth longed intensely to hear Paul say he was sorry, though knowing him so well, she had no confidence in that. Anguish stabbed her. Had his parents lived would he have been like this? Her mother had been inclined to shelter him too much, always trying to make up to him the fact that he had lost his parents. Perhaps she had tempered the wind to the shorn lamb just a little too much. Yet on the other hand, overstrictness sometimes had the same effect.

She said bleakly, "Paul, does Patty know?"

As she saw his eyes she knew that here was Paul's vulnerable spot, that in having to tell Patty would be his punishment.

"No. She was still on duty. I'll tell her tomorrow. After she has a sleep." He added: "It will finish everything, of course."

Elsbeth swallowed. "You mean she'll give you up?"

"I mean *I'll* give *her* up. I won't ask her to take me on after this. If I go through the courts again—and for something worse—her parents won't let her. They've never been really keen on me, anyway."

True enough. Patty was an adored only child but with a strength of character that far outreached any effects of spoiling. Patty had chosen to nurse against her mother's wishes. She was only twenty, so had to have her parents' consent. They certainly would not give it now, and even though they could wait, Patty herself might now have doubts as to Paul's suitability as a husband.

What a mess! There was the house they were building. Elspeth had given Paul the advance from her first novel to put towards the deposit. He'd managed the rest, and Patty had contributed too. She

had refused to take anything from her parents, and said Paul would feel beholden to them, if she allowed it. Elspeth had thought it wouldn't hurt the young couple to have to struggle a bit for a few years, that marriage would steady Paul; he needed responsibility. All that would go by the board now.

She said heavily, "Paul, when do we see Mr. Vincent?"

"Tomorrow morning at nine if you can get the time off. And at his home, not the office."

"Why is that?"

"Because nobody at the firm knows yet save Mr. Vincent. He said he ought to have told the directors immediately but thought he'd wait till he could see you."

What difference would that make? ... only postpone the evil day, thought Elspeth.

As they came up the steps of Mr. Vincent's lovely home in Bryndwyr, Elspeth wished above all things that he had not been a friend of her father's. It underlined this betrayal of his kindly interest in Paul.

Mr. Vincent himself came to the door. As he led them across the hall to his study Elspeth was aware that someone at the top of the landing upstairs went hurriedly away and closed a room door. Mrs. Vincent, she supposed. Kind of her not to answer the door herself.

Mr. Vincent looked white and strained. "I don't mind confessing I've lost sleep over this. It's not easy. I owe a duty to the firm and to the insurance company. I feel very disillusioned. I could understand perhaps, Paul, that in the panic of the moment you said you were

driving. But I thought you'd have had enough of your grandfather's integrity in you to regret that and make up your mind to face the music. There's a very nasty taste about perjury."

For the first time Paul seemed moved by regret.

He said jerkily, "Sir — it will sound so hypocritical to say how much I regret it. You could so easily think I'm only sorry because I've been found out. That I realize how much this is going to effect my future. Actually, it was only last night, lying awake, that I faced up to the unpalatable fact that for the rest of my life, after this case, people will not believe me, trust me. I've been a fool. I've let you down, I've let Elspeth down. She's put up with a good deal from me. I've let my fiancée down. I'm going to see her later today, and I'll release her from our engagement. I've played the fool and I've got to pay for it. Please don't be too upset about this, Mr. Vincent. You have to do what's right."

The situation wasn't altered, but Elspeth knew a lessening of tension. If Paul could meet it this way he would overcome. When it was all over, whatever the outcome, he would build another life.

Mr. Vincent walked to the window, stared out unseeingly. He came back to his desk, moved some papers to the right, moved them back, then spoke.

"Listen, Cameron. There's just one thing. So far I've kept it confidential between the head of the insurance company, the chap who overheard it, and myself. Naturally the insurance company want redress . . . they aren't going to lose all that money ... the car was a write-off and, as you know, we put only the best cars on the road. If there is any chance of you making restitution the company will settle for that. What are your chances?"

"How much?" asked Elspeth through stiff lips, her pulses racing at the thought that Paul might not have to go through the courts.

Mr. Vincent reluctantly named the amount.

"Oh," said Elspeth, and found her legs would not support her. She sat down.

She recovered in a moment. "We'll manage it somehow."

Paul stared. Not even a gleam of hope lit his eyes. "But, Elspeth . . . you ... we just haven't got it."

She stood up, squaring her shoulders, "I'll sell my car, I'll sell our antique furniture, I'll surrender my insurance and take out a smaller one ... I'll sell the cottage I've just bought down on the Taieri Plains. If you sell your motor- scooter, Paul, we'll just manage it."

"Elspeth, I can't allow you to do all that. What did you say? A cottage on the Taieri? But that's too far away for a weekender . . . why—"

"I didn't buy it for weekends, Paul, I bought it to live in. I—I wanted to give up working nine to five-thirty and keep myself by my pen."

Paul groaned. "I can't allow you to do it. Not that. We'll raise the money somehow. There's my insurance too."

Elspeth said: "That wouldn't be much—yet—no, the cottage will have to go. Anyway, I couldn't keep *myself* free-lancing without a bank-balance. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that we must raise the money."

Paul said hesitantly, "Perhaps you could just postpone your idea. Buy a cottage in say a couple of year's time. I mean you'll have only yourself to keep from now on—and you get a good wage at

Hoodman's, you've always spent a lot on me. If you gave up the flat and boarded you'd save more."

Elsbeth felt that the shock of remembering took her right between the eyes. *She no longer had a job.* She'd given in her notice. Alexander Hoodman had appointed Greta Morgan as her successor. She must not tell Paul.

She swallowed, managed, "That's right, Paul. We'll meet this."

Mr. Vincent said, "What about your sister and her husband? Wouldn't they—"

Elsbeth shook her head. "My sister had a very serious operation last week. She's on the mend, but we dare not risk any shock to her. Besides, though Loris supports herself now—she's nursing—they still have the twins to educate and they both want a medical career. That costs money. No, this is our responsibility. Paul's and mine." she added, "I can't thank you enough for giving us this chance. I appreciate it more than I can tell you. Now, if you will excuse us, we'll try to get things moving. Mr. Vincent, if it should take time to sell my cottage in Fair-acre Valley, could that be paid in later?"

She thought a strange expression crossed his face. "Fair- acre Valley? You mean . . . not far from Waipori?"

"Yes, do you know it?"

"I've been there once. Charming place. I believe it's a picture in spring."

Small talk, no doubt, bridging awkwardness. But a pang tore through Elsbeth. She would never see a spring come to Fair-acre Valley, never plant those irises along that stream, see those fat daffodil buds burst their green sheaths. That long old stable would never be

whitewashed, would never know roses and hollyhocks growing up its walls, tapping at its windows... it would remain for ever just a drawing in Dougal MacNab's sketchbook. Elspeth clamped down on the thought. She wasn't a looker-back. She didn't believe in it.

After lunch they sent for Patty.

She came in, eager, pleased Paul was home early from his business trip to Picton, but at one sight of his face she looked apprehensive, Paul had asked Elspeth to stay, reluctant though she was. He told Patty himself, baldly, not excusing anything.

Elspeth, unable to take her eyes from Patty's face, saw her, in a moment of realization, leave her careless girlhood behind and become a woman. Elspeth knew sheer admiration.

Patty said, her eyes fixed on Paul's, "So what, Paul?"

"So you can break our engagement, Patty. I won't hold you to it now. Even though it may not come to a court case your parents won't allow it. They'll think I'm not to be trusted with their daughter. I wouldn't blame them."

Patty said: "If this had come out after we were married I couldn't have run away, could I? It's for better for worse, the marriage bond, isn't it?"

"It would have been."

"It *is*. I didn't enter lightly upon our betrothal. It was for all time, even then."

He took a step towards her, then checked. "Your parents wouldn't allow it."

"They needn't know."

"How? Patty, I can't afford to go on with the wedding. I can't go ahead with the house. I can't furnish it. Everything I've got—and everything Elspeth's got, so help me—has to go into keeping this out of the courts."

"And everything I've got, too," said Patty.

When he went to speak she held up her hand. "Paul, you remember six months ago you were offered that move to Fiji—I didn't want to go, selfish brat that I am. I didn't want to go so far from Father and Mother. *But* for that this other affair might never have come about. There are quarters provided there, aren't there? It's still open, I think. And it carries a cost-of-living allowance. Remember that man who looked at the house last week when we went to see how far the builder's had got' . . . remember how he fell in love with the design and wanted to buy it there and then? He gave me his card—pressed it on me—said if we changed our minds we'd know where to find him? It would solve everything. Mother and Father would think we got our deposit backhand put the money in the bank. We could fly straight to Fiji . . . say we'd rather have our honeymoon in that romantic spot in the Pacific than in Australia. It's a chance, Paul."

Paul's eyes lost their momentary gleam of hope. "It's no go, Patty. It's—it's incredibly sweet of you, but I'll have lost my *job*. They won't *move me* to Fiji. They've no confidence in me."

"There's nothing wrong with your sales record. You only need more stability . . . and being married will anchor you!" She laughed—heaven knew how she achieved it! "Elspeth, didn't you say once your father lent Mr. Vincent money to carry on the business during the depression?"

Elspeth felt bewildered, "Yes, but he paid it back long since. It just tided him over."

"But didn't your father refuse to take a penny interest?"

"Yes . . . but you can't remind a man of that. And he paid back that kindness by giving Paul a job. And again now by giving us this chance of redeeming Paul's mistake."

"I don't intend to remind him. But he will remind himself. He'll be glad to do it, if he can. *I'm* going to see Mr. Vincent. *I'll* ask him if he'll give Paul a second chance. I'll tell him I'll work over there, nurses can find work anywhere. I thought I'd like a family right away, but we're young. We can wait two or three years for that. It will be fun. I've been so cosseted, so spoiled. I've always thought I'd like to try living on a shoestring."

Gazing at her, fascinated, Elspeth believed her. It was the sort of challenge Patty needed. Not everybody appreciated being born with a silver spoon in their mouth; *Patty had what it takes*. Perhaps she took after her pioneer ancestors.

Elspeth knew a great lessening of responsibility. She could cope with her own changed circumstances if Paul's future could be settled. Only . . . *would* Mr. Vincent come at it? Alexander Hoodman would have given one of his employees a second chance, but she didn't know Mr. Vincent so well. He'd been merely a younger business acquaintance of her father's.

Patty went out like a whirlwind, came back much later, confident, glowing.

Paul said, "What a time you've been, darling. He took some talking into it, did he? How I hate the thought of you having to plead for—"

"Oh, I've not been there all this time. I've been round to see the man about the house. I dared not wait. I could imagine him signing up for another house ... a house he wouldn't like half as well as our darling little house . . ." For the first time Patty's voice shook. She went on quickly: "Fiji will be fabulous. And with half the Pacific between Mummy and myself I'll learn to stand on my own feet at last."

Elspeth had asked Mr. Hoodman for two days off, pleading urgent family business to do with Paul's approaching marriage, but it meant things had to be done quickly. One thing, with import restrictions so tight on cars it was easy to sell one with as small a mileage as hers and in such good condition. She got far more than she'd thought. Before she went to bed that night it was as good as sold and the deal clinched the next morning.

She had a real pang when she saw it go. Perhaps that car had taken the place of the dog she couldn't have with being in a flat and away all day. But no matter, nothing counted against the fact that Paul might have been facing prosecution. After all, Elspeth herself had reason to know that even if you weren't the guilty party but only a material witness, it was an ordeal never to be forgotten.

They had a hasty lunch, and Paul went out, saying he was going to clinch the deal about the motor-scooter. Elspeth washed up and went down to see the antique dealer who'd sold her most of her furniture.

She told him she was moving to a cottage in the country. He was surprised she was selling up. "I'd have thought it would have been ideal for a country cottage. Are you sure you want to?"

Elspeth said quickly: "Well, I'll probably collect this kind of stuff round me later. I'm putting all I've got into buying the cottage and I've got to keep myself till my novels bring enough in for me to live on."

It sounded feasible. She wanted no rumours starting of how desperately the Camerons needed money. *How* it could so easily lead to *why*. For Paul's sake this must just seem like a change of plans, simply a bigger opportunity opening for him in Fiji. People could think she was going off to her cottage in the country and as soon as Paul and Patty were married—they were putting the wedding forward—she would go up to the North Island and get a job as an advertising clerk or copywriter.

She dared not let Mr. Hoodman know her plans had been changed. He too would ask why. She wouldn't get as good a job as before, but never mind, as long as Paul was all right—and he would be with a wife like Patty—she didn't mind starting again halfway down the ladder. Greta had been promised her job now and it wouldn't be fair to expect things to revert to their original status.

Tonight Elspeth would have to write to the session clerk- treasurer of St. Enoch's and say she was not going to live in the house after all, that she was going to put it on the market. Perhaps by then she might have thought of some reasonable excuse.

But now she was working against time, trying to get an estimate of all their assets to find how near they were to their target. If only Paul got as good a price for the scooter as she had for the Mini.

The car had been handed over, so now Elspeth was dependent upon public transport. It was nearly the end of the working day and she was dead-beat. She'd better take a taxi. She pulled herself up short. You won't, you know, Elspeth Cameron. You can't afford it. Take a bus.

She was foot-weary by the time she got home and the dealer was waiting on the doorstep. She took him in, glancing hopefully at the pad in his hand on which were scrawled the figures she had paid for the furniture originally. Her palms were hot and moist.

Then he said, "Good for you that you kept it so beautifully polished. Nothing like the good old elbow-grease. Most people these days won't make time for it. I wanted to have another look at that Welsh dresser."

A pang tore through Elspeth. It was the only heirloom they possessed. Her mother had been Welsh, a third generation Colonial, but the dresser had come out from Wales with her great-grandmother, one Gwendolen Williams. She straightened her shoulders. She wasn't in a position to be sentimental over mere furniture.

She was extremely pleased with the offer and closed with it. Things had gone surprisingly well. She decided she must have a cup of tea before the others got back. It might brace her for a final count of their pooled resources.

But they came in before she could switch the jug on. They had the mail with them but dropped it on the table, intent on other news.

"We got a good price for the scooter," Patty informed her, "and . . ." she looked at Paul.

"And I've sold my stamp collection too," he said. "The lot—Granddad's and mine. I'm sorry it should go out of the family, Elspeth, but he did leave it to me."

That didn't matter. Neither Rebecca nor Elspeth had cared for stamp-collecting, but Paul had been completely fascinated by it. Suddenly Elspeth could see the small Paul, seated by her mother's wheelchair, poring over the albums ... his dark head close to her white one. She'd been as interested as the little boy, no doubt feeling in the shared passion, a link with her husband. Elspeth could see so clearly the saucers of water, the damp, rolled-up towels, the magnifying glass, the little, eager boy. She put her head down and let the tears come, great sobs shaking her.

Paul dropped to the couch beside her, put his arms round her, "Elspeth, don't ... don't. I can't bear it. You mustn't cry for me. It's not half the sacrifice you're making. I'll start collecting again—for my son—when I've paid you back."

At that Elspeth sat straight up. "You'll do no such thing, Paul Cameron. You aren't starting off with debt. You're beginning your married life on a handicap as it is. You won't want to live for long with other people's furniture, afraid to spend a penny. I've got a career ahead of me and only myself to keep." She scrubbed furiously at her eyes. "It was only tiredness. I'm all right." Her eyes fell on the mail, a welcome diversion.

She snatched up an envelope, slit it open, said triumphantly: "There . . . how opportune! My novel's been published a month early, and this is the advance."

Paul stared at it, turned to Patty, said, "Patty, with the scooter, and the stamps plus the sale of the car and . . . this . . . Elspeth, have you got the figure for the furniture?" He totted it up, having added his own bank balance, Patty's, Elspeth's. He leaned back, his face a little stiff, said in a strained way, "Elspeth, I ... no, you couldn't really—not without more behind you—and your six-monthly royalties would be too small at first . . . and free-lance articles and stories are so iffy—but it's almost within reach. How tantalizing!"

Patty's voice, bewildered, struck in. "Elspeth, do *you* know what he's stuttering about?"

Elspeth shook her head.

Paul swallowed, tried again. "Don't you see, with your book advance we've got the amount—without your selling the cottage. Only how could you keep it for living in without a regular income? Elspeth, if you boarded for six months—it's always cheaper than flatting—and

saved like mad, you might have enough to keep yourself for the following six months. I mean you get such a magnificent wage at Hoodman's."

She had to tell him. "Paul, you mustn't feel too bad about this. I'd given in notice before this happened. Greta's got promotion. It would cause a lot of talk if I asked to be kept on. I'm going up north where no one will wonder why I left such a good job. I've not even got any furniture for the cottage. Just my desk. Never mind,, this will pay dividends eventually, I'll be able to write about North Island backgrounds then."

They had a meal together that none of them enjoyed. Paul seemed stunned at this last revelation. They watched the news on television; in two days that would be gone too. Then Elspeth persuaded Paul and Patty to go to a film. "You need it. Something to make you relax. The bottom's not dropped out of the world, you know. It seemed as if it had two days since, but our feet have touched rock again. No, I'm much too tired to go with you, thanks. I want to wash my hair."

That was an excuse. She wanted to think things out. The only sensible thing to do was to go north, start again. She'd lose money on the house, of course, but it would give" her something of a nest-egg.

She would not weep again. She leaned forward, switched on the television.

The next moment she started back, feeling as if her privacy had been invaded. From the screen Dougal MacNab's face looked at her. She'd come right in on a devotional period.

"Launch out into the deep," he said. "If people all through the centuries had not launched out into the deep how much poorer our lives would have been. If Abraham Lincoln had stayed a backwoodsman, if David Livingstone had stayed a mill-hand, if

Florence Nightingale had not fought" opposition, if President Kennedy had been content to be a member of a wealthy family, tasting only the pleasures of life ... a thousand instances spring to our minds . . . how much more suffering and injustice would be let loose in the world. Faith is not launching out and expecting a feather-bed to land upon. Faith is life lived in scorn of consequence . . . launching out and daring, nevertheless."

Dougal MacNab's face was replaced by another, but Elspeth didn't see that one. Here was one minister who believed in life lived in scorn of consequence. *Not like Perry.*

An echo from the hurtful past, Perry's voice came to her. "Haven't I always advised you to have second thoughts, Elspeth? To look before you leap. And now look what a mess you've made of things. And not only of your life, but of mine too."

Elspeth had said: "You're wrong there. My life is the only one that's going to be affected. Not yours. I'm not marrying you. Here's your ring, Perry."

Later, wearying of the subsequent discussion, she had said, proudly: "I'm not being noble. I'm not being self- sacrificing. I'm not doing this to save *your* good name. I just don't want to link my life with a man I despise."

But pride had been a cold companion for the lonely months that followed till she learned to fill up the gap with little things. A demanding job had helped. Nigel Montrose had helped. Her writing, more than anything, had helped. And it had acquired a depth not known before.

She was stupid for thinking she might still keep the cottage. A cottage, a typewriter, a desk were not enough. Yet here, tonight, Dougal MacNab had said: "Launch out into the deep." Had he ever

done just that? She didn't know. Though, he didn't appear to have hesitated to take his orphaned nephew and niece. An appalling responsibility for a single man.

Had she the courage to go down to Otago, buy the bare necessities for living, keep herself by her pen? She had one regular source of income, a humorous column for a North Island weekly. New Zealand magazines didn't have the circulation to pay high prices, but this would be enough to pay her grocery bill and rates. Nothing more. Her third book wasn't even started. But last year—even while working full time — she'd sold six short stories and perhaps a dozen articles.

Would she dare risk writing with the knowledge that it was imperative she sell them? Or would the fount of inspiration dry up? Could she stand the sight of a bulky, returned manuscript in the mail when it meant her electricity bill, her fuel? Though she'd have enough clothes for a year or more.

She picked up the unread evening paper, began to read mechanically. Then a small paragraph leapt up and hit her.

It was in the personal notes. "The Reverend Wallace Perrington, formerly of St. Crispin's Presbyterian Church, West Millingham, Canterbury, is shortly to return to New Zealand after studying in Edinburgh, where he has gained his Doctorate of Philosophy. Mr. Perrington is to have a few months' experience in clinical work in the U.S.A. first."

Elsbeth found herself on her feet, her mind made up. Perhaps a goad was better than a carrot in front of your nose any day! She wasn't having Perry come back to New Zealand to find her in a mediocre job in a cheap boarding-house. *No!* Fair-acre Valley, here I come!

She decided to do something about it right away, to commit herself. She rang Fair-acre Valley. Not the Manse, she'd rather speak to someone else. It was humiliating when one had discussed such high-flown ideas of altering the place to have to say cancel them.

She got Ronald Drew, the session clerk. She simply said that though she'd instructed the minister to set things in train, on wiser reflection she had decided to leave the alterations till she'd lived in the place for a while.

Ronald Drew approved. No use rushing. Nothing like living in a house to find out its defects. He'd tell Mr. MacNab, he didn't think he'd reached home yet. He finished up, "Anything we can do for you? When can we expect you?"

"My plans are very vague really. I've not worked out my notice yet. I'll let you know. And—and Mr. Drew, I— er—I don't think I'll send my furniture down till the alterations are done. Would any of Martha Moore's furniture be available? I could sell it later."

"I'm sorry, Miss Cameron. It's gone. A second-hand dealer bought the lot. It wasn't up to much."

After Elspeth had hung up she sat down and worked out what she could afford to buy in Dunedin to take with her. There would be such a tiny margin when Paul's affairs were settled. Nevertheless things were not as black as two nights ago. Paul no longer faced prosecution.

CHAPTER THREE

THREE weeks later, Elspeth, on a carrier's truck, drove into Fair-acre Valley. Paul and Patty were married and away to Fiji.

How different from the way she'd thought to come. The alterations would have been started, her lovely furniture have gone ahead of her; in Dunedin where she had spent the night, she would have engaged carpet-layers to come out to measure up.

As it was, apart from one packing-case of personal treasures, her mattress, pillow, sewing machine, desk and typewriter, there behind her on the truck were a kitchen table, four wooden chairs, two easy chairs sadly in need of recovering, a bed, a dressing table, both plain utility items.

But ... on Elspeth's lap, in a brown paper bag, was a huge bundle of iris rhizomes ... a gesture to the future. After all, she still had a dream, and if you could make a dream come true with a few iris roots, you might even be able to recreate a cottage with your pen!

Fortunately she had remembered, from her prowling, that there was a back way to the cottage. Instead of coming into the main street, you could wind round the stream from the Momona side of Fair-acre.

She saw the willows and poplars come into view, greening thickly now, then the chimney's of Martha Moore's cottage. Heavens, but it needed paint.

"Right here," she said to the driver.

He gave her a startled look. Elspeth looked so elegant and tailored. "D'ye mean it? Fair Dinkum?"

She grinned at him. "Fair Dinkum! That's the cottage I've bought."

"Strewth!" he said, scratching under his cap. "Take a fair bit to do that up, won't it?"

No good being touchy. "Yes, it will. I'm prepared to do a lot of work on it." (True enough. She couldn't afford to employ labor.)

"You must be a super-optimist, lady. Beats me. Parked out here in the middle of nowhere. Still, it takes all sorts.

I say, what are you going to do for a crust out here?"

Elspeth stared him straight in the eye. "I write for my living," she said.

His eyes bulged, but even as she said it she knew a lift of the heart. No longer was she tied to describing the vagaries of fashion, the latest whims, scrambling madly through papers night and morning in case Hoodman's many rivals were first with the latest, or cutting the prices or finding some new gimmick in advertising. She was done with the rat-race. She was now a freelance writer.

As soon as Elspeth unlocked the door she realized the parish women must have had a working bee. When she had seen it first, it had been filmed with dust. It even smelled sweet now . . . that astringent blend of soap, polish and kerosene. There must have been a pattern on the kitchen linoleum once, but it was plain brown now and was shining and smooth. The funny old stove had been black-leaded and a fire was set in it, only needing a match.

It was too much to expect any praise from that Dismal Desmond of a truck driver, though. "Well, at least it's roof over your head," he said.

He was a good worker, all the same, and set up the bed, something Elspeth couldn't have managed by herself. He opened the packing-case and Elspeth rooted out some cups and made them a cup of tea.

She was glad, waving him goodbye, to notice that he did not take the main road back. She didn't want him going into the pub and spreading the news that someone who called herself an author had just settled in at the cottage. Elspeth wanted to try to disguise the bareness of the place first. In any case she was going to cultivate a reputation for being a hermit, devoted to writing, so that no one should guess how pitifully meagre her possessions were.

Well, one thing, having so few sticks of furniture, it would take very little time to settle in, and as she needed to get down to writing as soon as possible, that was splendid. She'd have to concentrate on pot-boilers for a few weeks . . . humorous articles for the radio, short stories, topical articles, for newspapers. Anything for quick returns.

First she wanted to go outside and investigate something. There had been something different about the garden, glimpsed through the trees.

She ran out into the garden . . . *her* garden. Again that lift of the heart. For better or for worse, she was now the owner of a cottage in the country.

She turned a corner by some currant bushes . . . yes, it was certainly different. Here, where before had been a mass of chickweed and fathen, was a neat square of rich black earth, raked to a fine tilth, with rows of seedlings. At each end were white plastic pegs. Down she stooped to read what was printed there: Peas, beans, carrots, parsnips, lettuce, radish, silver beet. Some well-heaped furrows meant potatoes. Mint was growing, thyme, chives, parsley, sage. Some of last year's silver beet was still flourishing. She realized something . . . once she got a garden established she could practically live off it. Such rich ground, irrigated by the watershed of the Maungatuas. Not for nothing was the airport out yonder called Momona . . . meaning fertile land. The old orchard would yield so many varieties of fruit, she'd never need to buy tinned stuff again.

She'd noticed the cupboards were full of jam jars and preserving jars. It would cost her nothing but the sugar for a year's supply of jam and preserves. She looked at the red and black currants, the gooseberries, the apples, pears, peaches and plums with the gloating eye of a miser.

The whole orchard was burgeoning into full bloom now, hummed over by a myriad of bees. In another week this would be sheer enchantment. A wattle tree, covered with yellow fluffy balls, caught her eye. She walked down to it and beyond it she saw the stream over the fence. She turned back, found her new trowel, picked up the iris rhizomes and went down to the stream. Other less important things could wait.

Strictly speaking, this wasn't her property, she supposed. Ronald Drew had called it No-man's Land, running tween the church property and Candy Hill.

She put up a hand to look at the hill against the sun. Some day she'd climb that hill. What a view it would give, clear across the Taieri to Saddle Hill and the Pacific. Odd to be looking at the very feature Captain Cook had seen from the sea and named, two centuries ago. No wonder they called this one Candy Hill, a great outcrop of rock that cleaved the green turf in a peppermint formation of red and white stripes. What cataclysm of aeons ago had caused just that?

Elsbeth came back to the house, started work in real earnest. Marvellous to have it as clean as this to start with.

She made the shabby, sturdy bed, realizing as she flung the rose-red quilt over it that even drapes and spreads took away the starkness of the room. She'd known she'd get less than their worth had she sold these. By the time she'd polished the dressing-table, put out lace mats and her brush and mirror and her cosmetics, and laid the second-hand mat down beside the bed on the wooden floor, it didn't look so bad.

She ought to get on with the rest of the house, but had a love of finishing one job at a time, so fished out her pictures and vases and found places for them. The curtains took longer. They were too long. She set up her machine and hurriedly ran a deep hem in them. But the rose-sprinkled chintz looked charming.

She looked at a tea-chest, grinned, opened it and unpacked from miles of wadding what the staff at Hoodman's had given her ... a mahogany occasional table with a piecrust edge. "To match your other pieces," they had said.

Elsbeth started to laugh as she looked at it, then solemnly carried it into Martha Moore's completely bare parlor and set it down. "You can dwell there in solitary splendor," she told it, "till such time as I write a bestseller."

She hadn't even had money enough to buy a modern laminex table for the kitchen. It was a plain deal one with a scrubbed top, something that belonged to the kitchen's of yesteryear. Elsbeth had bought a table-cover of the same vintage at the second-hand shop, a dim tapestry one with a bobbly fringe. She was sure Martha Moore would have liked it.

Heavens, she was letting that wretched stove go out. What a trial it was going to be when typing, to keep replenishing it. A good thing there was a stock of fuel in the shed. None of her curtains suited this room, they were much too rich-looking. She ruthlessly cut up a large blue-checked tablecloth, hastily stitched them, and threaded them on the expanding wire that was still in place.

The old range was backed with red tiles. With the blue curtains it looked good. Elsbeth unpacked a blue-and-white ginger jar, stepped out on to the patch of red brick paving, outside the back door and picked some scarlet geraniums, setting them on the sill between the curtains.

She cooked herself some bacon-and-egg . . . what an hour to have lunch, but who cared? She was a free agent. Only knick-knacks to unpack now. By tonight she'd be able to start an article. There was something to be said for having few possessions. And no one to interrupt.

Her desk would have to go in the kitchen meanwhile. She'd unpack only the books she needed. It was going to be some time before she could afford bookcases. These could go on the old built-in dresser. She had just enough money to tide her over till her monthly cheque for the weekly articles came in. Good job she'd brought down all the stores from the flat. They'd keep her going.

How different housekeeping was going to be ... no more chickens, fillet steak, flounders, no more first-of-the-season strawberries, asparagus, peas. It would be half a pound of mince, the cheapest stewing steak ... red cod . . . silver beet, cabbage and turnip.

An idea for an article hit Elspeth amidships. And she had all the time in the world to write it. No job to rush off to, no telephone to ring ... no wonder the poets of old found living in an attic stimulating. It was nearly midnight before she went to bed and by then she had finished the last typing. She was almost sure it wouldn't be a homing pigeon.

Next morning when she woke she couldn't remember where she was . . . birds whistling, a queer rustling noise, the sound of water running ... of course, what magic, that was *tui* whistling, the cabbage tree leaves were whispering together, the little stream at the bottom of her garden was singing on its way . . . this was Fair-acre Valley.

She must get up and later on make herself walk to the Post Office and mail her article to Auckland, perhaps meet people. She'd have to be a little less than cordial. She couldn't afford to give hospitality such as she'd always given . . . didn't want anyone scanning the bareness of her home.

The sunshine flooding in the door lightened her spirits and she found that the water in the old-fashioned cylinder had actually stayed hot. She took a bath, pulling a face over the yellowed old bath-tub, and decided to wear a quite new green-checked spring suit in a loose jumper style. No need to look as if you were on your beam ends.

The bottle of milk she'd brought from Dunedin was beautifully cold on the marble slab in the dairy . . . what had Martha Moore called it? Oh, yes, the out-bye. Not such a miss after all, having no refrigerator. One thing, one could certainly economize on meals when living alone. Nothing wrong with crusty brown bread, toasted, and a pot of tea in a brown earthenware pot. Elspeth took it outside. There was a bench there, with a shoe-scraper beside it, right against the back door. A cascade of yellow jessamine climbed the wall and arched over the door. Little yellow stars lay scattered over the bricks. Against the wash-house japonica glowed.

She finished her toast, licked her fingers, sat dreaming in the sun and didn't hear even a step until Dougal MacNab suddenly stood before her, minus his dog-collar, and with a white enamel billy in his hand.

"Why didn't you let us know you were coming, Elspeth Cameron?" he demanded without so much as a good morning. "The women were looking forward to welcoming you. They'd planned to have a meal ready, to fill your pantry as they always do for newcomers."

Elspeth flushed, but she said as coldly as she could manage, "I'm afraid I'm not the sociable type. I planned to come as quietly as possible. It's solitude I'm after, time to write. It was, kind of them, of course, but I'm going to value my privacy."

Dougal MacNab would be rebuffed, beg her pardon, go away thinking. Well, after all, writers were queer kittle-kattle, temperamental and unpredictable.

But he missed his cue.

He said: "Great Scott! It's odd, but I'd never have dreamed you'd be the liverish-before-breakfast type."

"I've had my breakfast," she pointed out.

He looked at the plate and crumbs. "So you have—what a pity to let it last so long."

"I'm *not* letting it last!" Elspeth had to control a desire to shout. "I mean—I'm not liverish—not at all. Ever!"

He didn't look impressed.

She said: "But I meant what I said. I'm not socially inclined."

"What. I just don't believe it."

She bit her lip then burst out, "Mr. MacNab, that sounds quite a conceited remark. As if you couldn't imagine anyone not enjoying your company."

He burst out laughing. "You're deliberately trying to be insulting, aren't you, Elspeth Cameron? In the vain hope I'll get the pip and clear off."

Elspeth drew in a deep breath, trying to restrain herself. Her voice was silky with rage. "Then tell me how far I've got to go before I succeed in brushing you off?"

His voice was amused as. ever. "It's not possible, so I shan't waste time on it. My housekeeper sent me over to say you mustn't dream of cooking yourself a dinner today but must share ours. We have it a twelve-fifteen sharp."

Elsbeth let another breath go in a sigh. She'd done violence to her feelings by trying to be so unmannerly that she'd put him off. Now she would have to confess the unpalatable truth.

"I'm not taking hospitality, Mr. MacNab, because it's going to be a very long time before I can return it."

"Why not?"

She looked away, her hands instinctively clenching themselves. "Because—because I've had a reversal—financially —and I'm practically just camping in the old cottage. I can't entertain." (He'd think all she'd had in the flat had been on time payment.) ...

He shook his head over her. "This isn't the city, girl. It's the country. Nobody's going to care tuppence what you've got or haven't got. They'll look on it this way. You're a single girl, so it probably took every penny you'd saved to buy a cottage—even one as cheap as this. The whole parish knows you paid cash for it. They'll admire you for living with bare necessities. They'll cheerfully sit on a cheese crate if you haven't enough chairs."

Elsbeth flushed. "I've four chairs, only they aren't exactly—"

"Exactly antiques, such as in your flat. Och, what does it matter? I'll just put this milk in your kitchen, not out-bye, because it will need scalding. It's not pasteurized, of course. We have a cow, the Manse has quite a big glebe." He stepped inside.

Perforce, Elsbeth followed.

He looked round in amazement. "A born home-maker! Why, it's got the same air as in Martha Moore's day. I thought we were daft leaving the old rag-mat down, but we thought it might do till you got your own stuff unpacked. But it harmonizes, doesn't it?" He glanced

round. "But your desk is going to get knocked every time that door opens."

"I know. But it will have to be in here. For a time at least I'll want the heat from the stove to warm the place where I write. I'm as poor as that, at the moment."

Well, at least he didn't offer sympathy.

He looked round, strode to the pantry, looked in, said: "Do you intend using this for food storage?"

"No. I don't like food on open shelves. There are plenty of cupboards in the kitchen for my stores."

He was. running his fingers up and down the inside walls, his eyes intent.

"What *are* you doing, Mr. MacNab?"

He looked up, the blue eyes keen. "If this door was taken off, and the frame ripped off and widened six inches each side, it would make a perfect alcove extension. That's a sizeable window—right for light. The pantry shelves could be made into book-shelves. Then the stove would heat it too. It would look charming."

Elsbeth almost snorted. "It's a wonderful idea, but I have no money to pay Mr. Christopher Wren for doing so. So please stop making tantalizing suggestions."

"I'm going to do it myself. It's a hobby of mine—relic of my days in the trade. I've renovated most of the Manse by now. I'll start it this afternoon. I can't this morning. I've *got* Bible-in-Schools at the valley and at Koromico Falls."

"But isn't your time the parishioners' for visiting in the afternoons?"

"Not today. I'd intended having it off and staining these floors ready for you coming down. Mondays are supposed to be my days off, but this Monday I did urgent sick visiting in the morning, had a ministers' meeting in Dune- din in the afternoon and a Boys' Brigade function at night. It's against all rules of nature and God and health to work seven days a week. I'll start straight after lunch. Very little work in it. Pity Uncle Tim's not here, he loves it too. Although he's retired he's still on a Presbytery committee and he's in Wellington at the moment attending some meetings."

There was no stopping him.

He looked at his watch. "I'll have to go for my life. I'll be back about ten-thirty, but I must get into the study then. I'll come over for you at twelve-ten. Cheerio for now."

He was prompt. Elspeth said nervously, "I must tell Mrs. Donovan I won't do this often. A housekeeper has to be studied more than a wife, you know."

Dougal MacNab grinned, "my housekeeper is a treasure."

Elspeth realized that as soon as she met her. The sort of woman to whom housekeeping was everything, a creature of routine and method. She was dishing out at the kitchen table and the odors of cooking were delicious.

She said to Dougal: "Jo-anne's gone into retreat. If you don't call her to be introduced she'll likely emerge out of sheer curiosity."

Dougal said, more gravely than Elspeth had yet seen him, "Jo-anne is going through a difficult stage—more sullen than shy. We think it ties up with being deprived of her parents when she was too young.

She never mentions them, and when Robbie does, Jo-anne always runs away. Robbie has no inhibitions. If you don't mind, Miss Cameron, we'll just let her sit up to the table without introducing you formally and she'll join in when nobody notices. It's a bit awkward at a manse, where you have so many visitors, and of course I've not had the experience to deal with it"

The dining room was a pleasant, shabby room, typically manse. Elspeth picked up a wedding group from the mantelpiece and said, "for goodness' sake, that bridesmaid is a cousin of mine, Meg Kirkwood. Do you know her too?"

Dougal looked startled. "Do I know her? She's *my* cousin! Does that mean you and I are related?"

He looked anything but pleased.

Elspeth chuckled. "Your thunderclap of a brow is by no means complimentary to me." He didn't explain it, so she added, wrinkling up her forehead, "Meg is the daughter of a cousin of my father's, Andrew Kirkwood."

Dougal's face cleared. "Her relationship to me is on her mother's side. My father and her mother were cousins. No blood relationship between us, then We merely have a mutual cousin."

Elspeth felt puzzled at the relief she too felt. How perfectly ridiculous!

Dougal was grinning. "It couldn't be more satisfactory. Cousins by marriage! There's nothing to stop me spending time over at Martha Moore's place now. Nothing to make the parish raise their eyebrows. We're long-lost cousins, and you can stop calling me Mr. MacNab, Elspeth. It would be downright stupid."

Mrs. Donovan came in, slightly impeded by a small girl clutching her skirts. Jo-anne. Nut-brown curls tinged with gold, brown eyes, and a decidedly mutinous expression. Very dowdily dressed. What a pity. That dress was much too long. Jo-anne would have suited jaunty full skirts. She slid to her seat without a word.

The french window on to the veranda was flung open and in rushed Robbie.

"Hullo, Uncle Dougal. Just look at my knees, will you! I fell in the culvert. There's a bit of water in it and a terrific-sized frog. He let me hold him. I put him back, though. Hope none of the other boys find him. Would you come down after dinner and help me catch him? He'd be happier in the pool past the blackberry patch, don't you think? Lots of frogweed there and company. Gee, he was a beaut, you ought to have seen him blink. When he croaked . . . look, his neck went just like this, see . . ." Robbie put his head back and gargled.

They all laughed. He realized a stranger was present, blinked, said, "oh, sorry . . . who's this?"

Dougal said, "This is Elspeth Cameron from Martha Moore's. Remember I told you she was coming. Elspeth, this is Robert Fraser. Elspeth is a cousin of ours about five times removed, Robbie."

"Huh," said Robert comprehensively, and disappeared for the bathroom.

"Are you so?" demanded Mrs. Donovan. "And you never said a word, Dougal!"

"Just discovered it, Donny. Through this photo. That bridesmaid is my cousin and also hers."

"Well, fancy that! Well, it's about time you had a woman-body of your very own about. I call that Providential. Jo-anne, don't start till we've said grace, and Robbie's not back from washing himself yet."

Dougal said meanly: "Elspeth's not sure it's providential, she was planning to be a recluse. To devote all her time to writing."

Mrs. Donovan shook her head. "You'd never get by with that in Fair-acre Valley, Miss Cameron, But dinna worry. They'll not be for ever on your doorstep either."

"You'd be surprised," Robbie said, sliding his legs under the table, "how much dirt came off on the towel. Yet I scrubbed them like mad."

Dougal groaned. "Rob, how often have I told you to rinse off the dirty soap with the flannel? Now, it's your turn to say grace . . . wait a moment, what's that bulge under your jersey?"

Robbie gave him an awful look. "My hanky. We're supposed to have our eyes shut." He began, "For what we are about to receive . . . wow! Leave it alone, Uncle Dougal . . . now look what you've been and gone and done!"

Nobody had their eyes shut by now ... a lizard suddenly darted across the table, leapt into Mrs. Donovan's lap and ran up her bosom. She screamed, leapt up, overturning her chair, and sprang out of the way. Robbie was across the room like a lintie, hot in pursuit, with Dougal and Jo-anne after him.

"Keep and save us!" said Mrs. Donovan." "What a stra-mashing—and a visitor and all!"

"Don't grab it by the tail!" implored Robbie, flinging himself full length on the floor and wriggling under a colonial couch with a frill

on it. To Elspeth's amazement it was Jo-anne who emerged triumphant, holding the lizard round the neck.

She expected Dougal to be completely exasperated, but he just said, "Good girl, hold it gently but firmly . . . put it in here." He picked up a biscuit barrel from the sideboard, tipped the biscuits out and held it towards Joanne. She put it in carefully, withdrew her hand smartly and Dougal clapped the lid on.

Robbie, who'd been dancing with impatience, now disappeared and returned with a small tea-box with a fine mesh top. There was straw at the bottom. Evidently the Manse was always prepared for such happenings. Elspeth was sure it would escape again, but the three of them managed to get it transferred.

Mrs. Donovan, in no wise put out, returned from the kitchen with her soup-pot and ladle. "I'll just put a wee bittie more in each—it will be cold by now. Now, sit you all up and try to behave less like heathens, the three of you! We'll say our grace at the end of dinner this day or everything will be clay-cold. If only Robbie collected stamps or something civilized we'd not have all this hoo-ha at meal-times."

"Anyway," said Robbie virtuously, "it was all Uncle Dougal's fault for disturbing it."

"Disturbing it my foot! It was creeping up the front of your jersey ... it would have been in your soup any moment." He turned to Jo-anne. "You were very clever to get it like that."

"I wouldn't have dared, Jo-anne," said Elspeth, admiringly. Jo-anne said nothing.

Robbie said, "Are you going to like living in the Crooked House?"

"Crooked House . . .?" Elspeth started to laugh.

Dougal laughed too. "He'll put you off. Sounds decrepit. All due to nursery rhyme influence. Martha Moore was bent with rheumatism, she had a cat that had had a broken leg, and that stable does sort of lean up against the wooden structure, so . . ."

"I like it," said Elspeth. "I was trying to think of a suitable name. But Crooked House it shall be. I think I would have liked Martha Moore. Incidentally, did no one ever call her Miss Moore or just Martha?"

He laughed. "Not ever. You just can't separate Martha from Moore. We loved her too. The children just about lived there."

Mrs. Donovan wouldn't let Elspeth help with the dishes. "Off you go, the both of you, back yonder. Best to get that job done. These things aye take longer than you thought at first. Jo-anne's going to have her nap, I'll put my feet up too, then we'll bring afternoon tea over for the pair of you. And if the phone rings I'll just say the minister's out."

Dougal MacNab could hustle when he needed to. Elspeth found herself holding nails, passing saws, supporting timber. He seemed to have a well-stocked workshop at the Manse, and it was, as he'd said, not a big job.

Mrs. Donovan brought her knitting too and Jo-anne, shy and silent, sat in the far corner of the kitchen cutting out paper dolls. At four Mrs. Donovan went home, taking Jo-anne with her, and said, "Would you like me to have tea late for you, Dougal?"

He looked up, "No, thanks, Elspeth will give me tea. I've a meeting at seven-thirty. But I could finish this if I worked on here till seven."

When Mrs. Donovan had gone Elspeth said, "Dougal, I don't think you should stay. It's not wise. Small communities are noted for gossip."

He sat up, sighed, said, "Oh dear, you and Mrs. Wilmeston, the local Mrs. Grundy, would deal famously together."

She said sharply: "So there *is* a local Mrs. Grundy! All the more reason not to give her cause to talk."

His eyes regarded her impatiently. You've got a thing about this. I'm not proposing to stay till midnight. And anyway this newly discovered cousinship is useful. I think you've got an exaggerated idea of how strait-laced a township can be. You're out to guard your reputation at all costs. Makes me feel like a gay Lothario instead of a staid Presbyterian minister!"

Staid? No, he wasn't staid.

She said seriously, "Mr. MacNab, you've probably never had a word of scandal said about you in all your life. You haven't known what it means to have your reputation smirched. It simply does not pay."

He hammered a nail home, paused, then said, "There are shades of difference between reputation and character, you know."

"That might be so. But how many people can differentiate? I'm tremendously grateful to you for this. But I won't ask you to stay for the evening meal. Sorry about that. You can come over some time and bring Mrs. Donovan and the children." She forced a smile, added: "You'll have to bring a spare kitchen chair."

He picked up his screwdriver, used it expertly. "All right, we'll do just that. In fact we'll make it for next week and bring two chairs and Uncle Timothy. Safety in numbers! Slip over and tell Mrs. Donovan I'll be in for tea at six-thirty, will you? I daresay you can think up a reason."

"I'll tell her why," said Elspeth over her shoulder. She came back to say, "I simply told Mrs. Donovan I didn't think it was policy for a single minister to visit a single woman. She quite agreed."

He didn't answer her.

It was then that she heard the postman's whistle. "Is that a postman, or one of the children with a whistle?"

"It's the postman. Did you think we had to collect it? He's very late."

"Yes. I daresay it will be just a leaflet. I hardly think my mail would be forwarded on yet."

But it had been. A great fat bulky, horrible envelope! That meant a rejection. They came in spasms. Either all acceptances or all rejections. Let's hope this wasn't the first of a run. It was from Australia. Must be those two stories she'd sent to Melbourne five weeks ago.

She slit the envelope, shook out the contents, then stared. Only one story returned and a cheque attached to an acceptance slip. It was for a larger amount than any short story had ever brought her so far. She picked up the story, a letter was attached.

"... we would like you to revise this story, say from. page three, and return it to us for further consideration. Technique is faulty in middle. You have scattered too few clues for the reader. This is not playing fair. See our remarks and suggestions in the margin."

She said, "I beg your pardon, Mr. MacNab, what did you say?"

He was irrepressible, that one. "You'll find me an expert at turning the other cheek. Except when I get really mad, then the whole family goes for cover. But I said Mrs. Donovan gets a bit lonely at nights. She'd appreciate your dropping in."

Elspeth's look was shrewd. "I, expect what you really mean is that you think *I'll* be lonely. But I won't be, Mr. MacNab, I've work to do." She hesitated, said awkwardly, "please don't think me ungrateful and churlish. This has been very neighborly, but—"

Dougal MacNab stood up, matched her look for look, said: "But you don't like being under an obligation, do you? You know, Elspeth Cameron, I've not got much time for pride. I see an awful lot of it. Somebody's ill so a neighbor pops in with a jar of soup. The recipient can't possibly return that darned jar empty. No, soon as she's better she fills it up with raspberry jam, costing three times as much as the soup. She dare not be under an obligation. Or someone takes someone else's toddler while her mother goes to the nursing home to have another baby and when the mother gets home she belts down to the store first thing and buys a really expensive present—completely out of proportion—like an electric jug or a pop-up toaster! I don't like it. Pride is a major sin."

Elspeth's eyes were downcast, but she looked up then and said with a rather desolate air, "Not always, Dougal MacNab. I can remember a time when I had nothing left but pride. It carried me through." She swallowed, added, "but I have been ungracious. I hated the fact that I couldn't engage a man to do this and pay him. I'm sorry. But I am serious—for your sake—about you visiting me—alone."

"All right, I'll respect your wishes. I'll give you time to get over that. Now, if you get your broom and we sweep up this sawdust and shavings we can bring your desk in. I daresay the rest you can manage. The shelves are graded pretty well for books — I note you have a lot. And since you're so independent, I guess you'll want to repaint the alcove yourself."

After he left Elspeth realized that this had transformed the kitchen. The matting she'd brought down from the tiny slip of a spare bedroom at the flat covered the floor; she had a spare reading-lamp

that would do for typing at night and tomorrow she'd make curtains out of some she'd brought down. Once her books were on the shelves it would be no longer bare.

She saw quite a lot of Mrs. Donovan in the next few days, though she refused invitations to meals on the score of work. Mrs. Donovan said: "But if ever you feel you canna stand another meal on your lone, don't wait to be invited. No buying milk, either, we've more than enough to spare and I canna abide waste. There's another thing. When Martha Moore died we took her bantams. She never kept any other fowls. But we've nowhere separate for them and they're nothing but a nuisance. Would you have them? They lay well. One of them wandered off the night she died and hasn't been seen since—I think a stoat must have got her—so there are eleven. There's a barrel of mash and one of wheat in that old shed to keep you going for long enough."

Elspeth- suspected that it was an excuse to help out with the commissariat but, mindful of Dougal's lecture on pride, dared not refuse. Besides, it made for something live around the place. Nice to wake in the mornings to triumphant cacklings and know she could have a fresh-laid egg to her breakfast.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELSPETH bought paint out of a tiny fraction of the cheque and enjoyed the painting. Up went the curtains, out went the books, colorful in the bright jackets of the new ones, mellow in the faded bindings of the old. The window of the former pantry looked east and framed Saddle Hill. Elspeth felt warmth and healing seeping into her.

She might have lost some dearly-loved possessions, she no longer owned a cheque-book; she'd lost Perry's love and Nigel's friendship—but she owned a patch of earth, she had a window with a view and a cottage that was shabby and old but had a sound roof against whatever storms might come. And time to write.

Dougal MacNab didn't come near her the rest of the week.

Elspeth chided herself for listening for a footstep, a whistle. If she heard them it would only be the postman. How could she think *only*, when once he brought her another acceptance! She gloated over that cheque, she was safe now till her monthly cheque came. What did it matter if Dougal MacNab didn't come? That was what she'd tried to do . . . brush him off. Better for everyone.

Jo-anne never came by herself, only with Robbie, a silent shadow. Robbie would burst in, eager to show her something . . . one of last year's nests blown down, a black furry caterpillar, silkworms, a stick insect. His words tumbled over each other in his haste to get them out.

Elspeth would find herself following him across the stream, splashing over the stepping-stones, and being sworn to absolute secrecy about where the wild duck had made its nest; moving through the pocket of bush in the gully and sitting motionless till the opossums crept out and peered at her, their darling dark eyes beady and watchful.

With Robbie you had to take the good with the bad. Elspeth learned never to trustingly hold out her hands and shut her eyes. True, it might be a blackball or a caramel, but more often it was a snail, slimy and moving, or an earwig. She insisted on keeping her eyes open.

She found his company less demanding than an adult's. It gave her a chance to get on with her writing. He'd sit for hours at her table while she typed, watching his silkworms.

She hadn't been to the store yet. Robbie had got her butter, cheese, bread. But she'd have to go next week. Break the ice.

She expected Dougal MacNab would come across on the Saturday to invite her to the Sunday service, or, at the least, to get Mrs. Donovan to ask her. But it wasn't mentioned. It looked as if he was taking seriously her desire to be left alone.

It was only at the last moment Sunday night that she decided to go to the service. She slipped hurriedly into a slim-fitting black suit with a vivid green shantung blouse under it, fastened a pearl brooch in the lapel, clipped pearl ear-rings on, pulled on a black fuzzy cap like a Cossack's seized gloves and bag and hurried down Manse Lane.

The last sound of the bell died away as Elspeth slipped into a seat halfway down. A big burly man came and sat next to her, smiled as she looked up. You wouldn't mistake him for anything but a son of the soil, she thought affectionately. The type she liked best.

The beadle had already placed the Bible on the pulpit and returned to the vestry door, holding it open. Dougal MacNab came in, acknowledging the service of the beadle with a faint nod, mounted the steps to his pulpit, strangely austere-looking in his black gown and white bands.

Could this be the man she had dared be rude too? She'd seen in her office, in the lounge of a fashionable city hotel, on television; she'd seen him in a khaki apron hammering in her kitchen ... but there was no doubt at all that this —the pulpit—was Dougal MacNab's right sphere.

She'd realized, of course, that his voice was charming, but there was so much more to it than that. Even in his opening words she was conscious of the depths of sincerity in it, the power of his belief. Something that had nothing to do with the pleasing timbre of it, the faint suggestion of a Scots burr that, since he'd told her even his grandfather had been born in New Zealand, must be a relic of pioneer Scots ancestry.

In the second verse of the last hymn before the sermon one of the ushers came down the aisle and spoke to the burly farmer-type next to her. He nodded, said, "Right," then to Elspeth's surprise, under cover of the singing, leaned near her and said in her ear: "Penalty of being a doctor. Somebody's baby starting. You're the writer aren't you? My wife, Georgie, said I was to be sure to meet you. She reckons she's read every short story you've ever written and has got your novel. Do call and see her. Name of Gainsborough." And he moved out.

So much for the writer who thought she could mentally tag everyone! Twice she had taken men for farmers . . . one had been a minister, one a doctor. She was fairly sure the psychologists would have a name for it. A back- to-the-land complex or something.

Having been disillusioned about Perry, she was sheering off professional men . . . wanted everyone to be tilling the good earth, simple, uncomplicated, in complete rhythm with the seasons, independent of public opinion as affecting their livelihood! All of a sudden she realized that for the first time in years, she could think of Perry with humor.

But Dougal MacNab was no. more than five minutes deep in his sermon when Elspeth had forgotten everything save the sheer poetry and compulsion of what he was saying. Though he was not an emotional preacher, was restrained and careful in his utterance, there was still a hint of gaelic fervour in it.

She wondered how Dougal MacNab would be after the service . . . tense, rather exalted, a little too highly strung? Or exhausted?

He went down the aisle to the door, stood shaking hands. Someone took hold of Elspeth's elbow, a thin woman with a vinegary face, but she said, her eyes lighting up, "You are Elspeth Cameron aren't you? My, we're honored you've come amongst us. How we look forward to your column in the Weekly. And your book's in the library here. My husband's got his own copy, though. He's read it three times, he's a great one for reading things over."

"Your *husband*?" Elspeth's book, she'd thought, had purely woman-appeal. The woman twinkled, "Well, I'll admit he doesna go for love stories as a general thing, but he's mad keen on anything written about New Zealand and he was real taken with yours. But oh, he's been that disappointed you've not been into his shop yet. He's looked for you every day. He's the butcher. He's very worried lest you might be a vegetarian. He can't stand vegetarians . . . lentil cutlets and nut rissoles! How is it you've not wanted any meat?"

Elspeth chuckled. "Tell him I'm very fond of meat. But to save me time while settling in, I lived on the tinned meat I brought from my flat in Christchurch. But I get very tired of tongue and salmon. Nothing like a bit of beefsteak. I'll be in tomorrow, tell him. What is your name?"

"Swallow. I'm Rose Swallow and my husband's Reuben Swallow. My, he'll be annoyed he wasna here the night. He rarely misses, he's awful fond of Mr. MacNab, but he's a rare hand with sick animals

and he got called out to Berwick way. A poor cow, calved in a ditch. But Reuben'll likely save her, he's as good as a vet."

By this time they were up to the Reverend Dougal. He smiled at Mrs. Swallow. "I see you've met. Would you like to come to the Manse tonight? Oh, I see. Yes, I realize Reuben will expect you to be home for him when he gets back—well, perhaps next week when he's with you. I know he's a fan of Elspeth's. Did Miss Cameron tell you we're distant cousins?"

Mrs. Swallow was delighted. "You don't say? I'd no idea. Well, isn't that wonderful! She'll be able to help you with the bairns. Mrs. Donovan must find them a bit much, at her age. Well, I never!"

They went to pass on, but Dougal drew Elspeth back. "My parishioners all want to meet my cousin," he informed her, the blue eyes audacious.

Elspeth couldn't do a thing about it, she had to stand there with him, gravely shaking hands. Suddenly she found she was struggling with laughter. He'd spiked her guns. No use trying to hermitize after this session. She subdued her laughter and managed to quit herself well.

Mrs. Donovan was last out. Elspeth was surprised. Surely Mrs. Donovan wouldn't leave the children sleeping by themselves?

Dougal, unknowing, laid her fears to rest by saying, "This is Donny's turn to come to evening kirk—Uncle Timothy is home." He added: "We are expecting you to supper, Elspeth, I've asked quite a number to meet you." He dropped his voice. "And don't forget, lass, it has to be Dougal on account of our being cousin's!"

Elspeth gave him an exasperated look and disappeared in Mrs. Donovan's wake.

The rest had shed their coats and hats in Mrs. Donovan's bedroom, so Elspeth did also. Mrs. Donovan bustled away. Elspeth ran a comb through her hair, loosening the faint waves, and decided she'd go through to help Mrs. Donovan. On the way she passed a bedroom with a night-light. She remembered Dougal saying Jo-Anne suffered from nightmares and was afraid of the dark. How wise they were to give her a light. She looked in.

Jo-anne lay spread-eagled, the clothes tossed off, the little cheeks flushed, the gold-brown lashes like fans on them. Elspeth tip-toed in, gently lifted the little arms, tucked them under, lifted a straying curl, laid it back and slowly turned the child on her side. Children often had nightmares when lying on their backs. She' was aware of movement beside her, looked round. Dougal MacNab. She finished tucking the child in, laid her hand for a moment on the little cheek. Jo-anne moved against it and the rosy lips murmured quite distinctly: "Mummy?" then sighed and relaxed into silence.

Elspeth bit her lip to control its trembling, turned swiftly away. Dougal MacNab caught her two hands, turned her round, peered at her in the dim light, said, "I thought so! Tears Not the hard-boiled cynic you make out you are, eh?"

Elspeth looked back at the sleeping child, whispered, "It's hard to be cynical in the face of that."

He nodded, took her elbow, said, "Come on, meet the others. Some of them came over here before you got to the vestibule."

Impossible to feel aloof with these friendly people. Then, suddenly, Elspeth saw a face she knew. The owner of it rose from her chair, met Elspeth's outstretched hands with her own, cried: "Elspeth Cameron! Well, how delightful. I've been away for a month. All I heard tonight the cousin of the minister's had bought the Crooked

House. To think it was you! I'd no idea you were related to Mr. MacNab."

Elspeth said hurriedly, "Oh, it's very distant, Cecilia. One of these vague relationships too complicated to explain."

Dougal picked up the wedding photo, said to Cecilia, pointing out Meg Kirkwood, "This is another cousin of ours, Mrs. Grainger, that bridesmaid on the left." The mobile eyebrow nearest Elspeth had flown up, he gave her a sidelong glance. He was outrageous, Elspeth decided. He continued: "And you'd no idea either, that an old friend was living here, Elspeth?"

"None whatever. Cecilia and I worked together yeon ago."

Cecilia nodded. "At Gardiner's. Our first job. We started on the same day. This is wonderful, Elspeth."

Then somebody else in a dog-collar was claiming Elspeth's attention. He'd just come in with a huge trolley of cups and food. As tall as his nephew but not so broad and white-haired, slightly bald in a most attractive way. Before Dougal could introduce them he'd crossed to her, took her hands and said, "How really charming to have a sort of niece turn up. I'm Uncle Timothy."

Across the room Elspeth met Dougal's amused eyes again. She gave up. She squeezed Mr. MacMaster's hands and said, "And very nice for me. I just faintly remember Meg talking about her Uncle Tim." She did.

Elspeth tried to remember the name of the local Mrs. Grundy. Was it Wilmeston? She was pretty sure no one of that name was here. So Dougal wasn't putting it on for *her* benefit. He was merely stressing the cousinship to please what he thought were Elspeth's outdated notions. Or just couldn't resist teasing.

Margaret Murray, sitting beside her, a woman in her late sixties probably, said, "I'm so happy you've come here. I've always wished Mr. MacNabb had someone of his own generation to help him with the youngsters. He manages fine—his uncle is a great help—but they seem singularly lacking in close women relatives."

Elsbeth said carefully, "It's never easy for a man, a single man, to take on a ready-made family."

"No, and at first it was even harder. I did admire him, didn't you, giving up going to Edinburgh for further studies when his sister got killed? Not many men would have faced up to the responsibility. They would have put them in one of our Church Homes instead of cancelling their passage and taking a parish. We were lucky to get him, we'd been vacant some time.

"How he and his uncle managed at first with just a woman coming in for the mornings, I don't know. Certainly Mr. MacMaster always stayed with the bairns at night, but it was hard going. To say nothing of that young fellow coping with every single woman in the parish thinking he needed a wife even more than most ministers do."

Elsbeth laughed. "Oh, did they? I'd not thought of that Poor Dougal!"

She looked across at him. He was sitting by Cecilia. She had a slightly uneasy feeling. Cecilia was no gossip and in any case, all those years ago, it hadn't been Elspeth's friends who had whispered about her. They had known her too well. But Cecilia would naturally assume Dougal would know. Not that one could ever hope to dodge gossip. New Zealand was too small a place and people's memories too long. And the arm of coincidence was a long one too.

Cecilia Grainger was more animated than usual, Dougal thought. She was an uncommonly pretty girl if you liked 'em with an -air of fragility. He didn't himself. His gaze flickered inevitably to Elspeth . .

. despite its femininity her face was a strong one, with high cheekbones, slightly slanted laughing green eyes, a row of freckles over the bridge of her nose, a certain controlled, wary look about her, save for her mouth. It was exquisitely curved, smallish, passionate, tender ... He brought his attention back with difficulty to what his parishioner was saying.

"I'm so thrilled to have Elspeth here, a friend of my single days. She always makes you feel life is good. We lost touch. It's wonderful to think she's making such a success of her writing. I've often wondered about her. When I knew her engagement was broken after that wretched affair, I felt so worried. I knew it would go deep with her. She was so much in love with him. Just the type to suffer an old-fashioned broken heart. But she looks as much fun as ever. What a girl she was for getting into mischief. Did she take it badly, do you know?"

Dougal said carefully, "Actually, we've seen nothing of each other till now. But she doesn't exactly look as if she's going into a decline, does she?" He changed the subject.

Elspeth was struggling with more invitations to visit than she could cope with. Every time she met Dougal MacNab's eyes they were wickedly amused. Nevertheless she found it heart-warming. She felt the tables were turned when two people said to him: "When you visit us next, do bring your cousin with you."

Elspeth got in quickly, "It's lovely of you, I do appreciate it. But I'm afraid I'm a working woman. In the writing game it's so easy to let the time slip by. I've a very rigid time-table. So much typing, so much research—if I can dignify it by that name—so much gardening for exercise. I'll want to get to know you all—" She avoided Dougal's eyes—"but it will have to be very gradually and in my own time, not the minister's. More in the evenings perhaps, but I must get a novel away first."

They were disappointed yet approving. In fact one said: "That sounds fine and sensible to me. I've always thought of authors as very, very temperamental, getting an inspiration in the middle of the night and writing till sun-up, then sleeping during the day. Or writing with unwashed dishes all round. I do like to hear of one who does it to rule."

Elsbeth burst out laughing. "I was brought up by a mother with a positive mania for method. Washing and ironing Monday, polishing and scrubbing Tuesday, silver and windows Wednesday . . . you know the sort of thing. I don't quite manage that, but any time I'm tempted to sit down at a typewriter without the place reasonably tidy, I feel her ghost on my track tut-tutting at me."

"A good thing and all," approved Margaret Murray. "Nothing like routine for a well-ordered life, long's you don't become such a slave to it that you can't have a fling once in a while or find time for someone in trouble. You'll do us."

It was late by the time the first one made a move to go home. Dougal said to Cecilia, "Have you got the car?"

She shook her head. "Kenneth's got the engine to bits. It's the joy of his life, but for myself I'd rather have a man who didn't know a thing about a car's innards. Garages always return them to you intact. But I'll get a lift with the Davidsons."

"No, Elspeth and I will walk up with you. I love a walk after a day of three services. It unravels me. And she's not seen the Valley by moonlight yet."

Elsbeth immediately said she'd planned to help Mrs. Donovan with the dishes, but found that a couple of the young ones always did that.

Cecilia's husband had a poultry run at the far end of Fair-acre. Elspeth was enchanted. The road dipped down to a creek and crossed it by a humpy-backed bridge covered with moss and with ferns springing out of the crevices. Weeping willows clustered close and in the moonlight pussy-willow buds shone with a faint silver radiance.

They left Cecilia at her gate and retraced their steps. Silence accompanied them, a comradely silence.

Dougal stopped, said, " 'Look, how the floor of Heaven is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold;'—Shakespeare! There, I got in first. Elspeth, what sort of heels have you got on?"

She gazed at him, then turned up a foot for his inspection. "Heels of the most foolish, Dougal. Why?"

"Up there," he gestured with his pipe, "is the most wonderful view in the whole Taieri. But—" he looked doubtfully at her heels.

Elspeth laughed, completely natural at last. "I've never yet let heels spoil a view. They'll sink in, but what odds?"

He gave her his hand because it was scarcely a track at all and steep. She made no bones about taking it and relinquished it immediately they reached the top.

"Spoil-sport," said the Reverend Dougal MacNab, but Elspeth was too busy taking in the view to reprove him. It was like something out of a film-set. Before them, right to the Pacific, stretched the Taieri Plain . . . radar was winking near the airport; beneath them twinkled the lights of farmhouses, there were here and there silver gleams as the Taieri threaded its way to the sea. Lights, like cats' eyes, moved over the Main South Road in two directions. Far out at sea, somewhere between shore and horizon, were the lights of a ship steaming south to Bluff. A great arm of wattle hung in a graceful

curve over their heads, and, framed in it, the moon, now starting to ride high. A thousand stars gemmed the vastness of the sky. Magic stirred Elspeth's pulses. How right she had been to come here.

The pine-needles were soft under their feet. Dougal indicated a huge rock. "We'll sit down ... it will get you off those ridiculous heels. It's sandy here on the knoll and you're sinking in."

She moved gratefully to the rock. It was most conveniently shaped for a seat. Dougal sat down too, not close. He put his pipe away.

"They call this rock 'Lot's wife'," he said.

Elspeth said dreamily, "I'd not blame anyone for stopping to take a last look at this. Isn't it odd ? I was born and brought up in Canterbury, yet I've the queerest feeling of returning home."

"Your Scots blood. Very fitting that you should come here over the Border."

"And very fitting that you, a MacNab, should be a minister."

He turned to look at her, astonished. "Eh? Oh, you mean because of the old tradition of the MacNabs? I didn't dream anyone of your vintage would know that—or care— about it. Margaret Murray does, but then she's steeped in Scot's history."

"So'm I. My father saw to that. The others didn't care tuppence. Rebecca and Johnny. I just lapped it up. I remember well. The MacNabs. Clann-an-Aba ... the children of the Abbot. The preachers."

"Oh, how my grandfather would have liked you. I suppose you never heard him, Elspeth? The Reverend Francis MacNab?",

She shook her head. "But I think I read about him in some Presbyterian Centennial publication. Didn't he do pioneer parish work on the West Coast?"

"Yes, spent half his life in the saddle, fording rivers, baptising infants in the most remote places, doing a great work among coal-miners and gold-miners. But my father took up farming."

Elsbeth said slowly, "Francis? That would be a family name? Wasn't there a famous painting? I can't remember who by."

"Yes, a Raeburn. The last chief in the direct male line." He added ruefully, "I'm afraid I know a lot less about the Camerons."

Elsbeth laughed. "No matter. I collect stray bits of information the way some people collect stamps or teaspoons. Writers do."

They sat in silence, watching the ship make its seemingly slow way down the coast. Elspeth's mind drifted completely away from the present as it had a habit of doing ... she must read up local history. This could be the setting of a future book and it took a lot of reading before you got the feel of it. Elspeth's fingers tingled at the thought ... she could almost reel the typewriter keys under them, framing words.

She came back to the present with a jerk because Dougal MacNab's hand was suddenly on hers, warm. He was laughing.

"Come back, come back," he chided. "You're a thousand miles away."

"Not a thousand miles ... a hundred years, with the pioneers."

She went to slip her hand from under his. His grip tightened. She looked up. His face was near and smiling.

"I know it's much too soon, Elspeth. But some day I want you to marry me."

She got such a shock she couldn't reply, couldn't move.

His eyes held hers, his mouth was tender. "Taken your breath away, have I ? It's all right. I don't expect an answer. I just wanted you to know."

Elspeth released the long-held breath and said crisply: "I think you must have taken leave of your senses. Don't ministers preach a practical approach to marriage? Don't they warn against sudden infatuation? Say there must be friendship and liking as well as—as well as attraction?"

He was undisturbed, still holding her hand in that remorseless grip. "There is all that in my feeling for you. Friendship, liking, respect, passion. See ... I don't flinch from the word, nor replace it with a pallid substitute like attraction!"

She swallowed. "—I just don't believe in this sort of thing, Mr. MacNab!"

There was pure merriment in his laugh. "Calling me Mr. MacNab won't put me at a distance, you goose! He sobered. "Come to think of it, I didn't believe in it myself, till that day in your office."

She stared again. "Now I *know* you're mad. You aren't trying to tell me that you—that you—er—"

"I did, you know. It just happened. A sort of recognition. You were there. And you were you. My sort of woman. I've always been scornful of such things before. I used to curl my lip when reading: 'Whoever loved that loved not at first sight?'"

He paused. Elspeth said nothing. He peered into her face. "You know, I really believe you're suffering from shock. You've missed your cue. You ought to have said: 'Christopher Marlowe'."

She turned on him in a flash, glad to get back on to a nice safe subject. "You're wrong. It was Shakespeare. In 'As You Like It.' I hope you're more careful in the sources of your quotations for sermons."

"*You're* wrong. Shakespeare *quoted* it in 'As You Like It.' Marlowe said it first."

Elspeth blinked. "You're the maddest thing. Now I *know* you don't mean me to take you seriously. What man would start arguing about quotations in the middle of a proposal?"

She realised he was laughing helplessly. She would *not* laugh back!

"Wrong again, Elspeth. That wasn't a proposal."

"It wasn't a—but you said—"

"I did not say: 'Will you marry me?' I merely told you I was going to marry you some day. There's quite a difference. I was not asking for an answer. I told you that in paragraph two, section four."

Elspeth sat bolt upright and succeeded this time in removing her hand. "Well, you may not have asked for an answer, Dougal MacNab, but you're getting one right now. And it's no, no, no!"

" 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much.'—'Hamlet.' If you really meant it, one 'no' would be enough. Moreover—"

"Moreover, if you don't stop firing quotations at me I shall go screaming mad! The answer is no. *One* no. One wholly and

completely convincing *no*. I wouldn't marry a minister if he were the last man left on the earth. There!"

"Why?"

Elspeth slid off the rock. He followed suit. She faced him. "As a matter of fact, if you knew everything about me you wouldn't *want* to marry me. I'm no fit wife for a minister."

Dougal said calmly, "If it's because of that doubtful business Paul got himself into, it doesn't matter a tin of fish. It's you I'm going to marry, not your nephew."

Elspeth got such a shock she sat down again. She closed her eyes against the knowledge that this man knew, that anyone knew except themselves and those vitally concerned.

Dougal was standing over her when she opened her eyes. His hands came to her shoulders. "Listen, Elspeth, I wouldn't have told you I knew had you not said just that. You're making a bogey out of this. Most families have a skeleton tucked away. Mr. Vincent is an uncle of mine — well, a cousin of my mother's really. I was staying with him. He asked my advice, mentioning no names. I got a terrific shock the morning you came to his house. I saw you from the landing.

"It gave me a bad time. I kept in touch with Uncle Vince to find out how things were going. I was going to try to get the church managers to refund part of your purchase money and let you pay the rest gradually if there was no other way, though I wasn't going to tell them why. Naturally I wanted you here, though if you hadn't been able to come, you would have found me in Christchurch pretty often. So ... objection overruled. Your nephew's peccadillo is no bar to marriage with me ... or any minister."

Elsbeth said slowly and distinctly; "I wasn't referring to Paul's doings, but to my own. There was a scandal in my own life — a very public one — that caused the minister I was engaged to to break the engagement." She shrugged. "Perhaps there's bad blood in our family, Dougal. You'd better stand back from us." She looked at him shrewdly. "I made it fairly plain to you the night you arrived in a dog-collar. You must have known it wasn't Paul's doings that I found a barrier. You just thought it was another objection. And that you could clear *that* one up. It's bad enough being an ordinary person when the gossip-hounds get going, Dougal, but a minister's wife must be like Caesar's . . . above reproach!"

He shook her. "Come on, out with it. Let me be the judge."

Her face halted him. It was white and tense. "You're going to say perhaps I made too much of it. I didn't. I repeat I'm no wife for a minister. Please don't ask me anything about it. It hurts to dig it up, mull over it. It's in the past and nothing to do with you because my future has nothing to do with yours. We can be friends, that's all. This is why I tried to be rude to you when I first came here. For your own sake."

His hands came up to cup her face. It was cold.

"All right. If that's the way you want it. I've no wish to drive you away from here, but ..." he turned and swept an arm towards the village, lying below them over the other side of the hill, "they aren't all saints down there, you know. Plenty of old scandals, old heartaches. Plenty of the church members have pasts . . . people I think are the salt of the earth in the way they've overcome. Even some of the ones lying in the kirkyard under stones that extol their virtues hadn't lived blameless lives."

Elsbeth said: "I know perfectly well the church is for sinners and publicans too . . . but a manse must steer clear."

"I could knock that argument into a cocked hat, you know, but I think you've had enough tonight. You had a gruelling time before coming here. And of course you know Paul's secret is safe with me, don't you."

"Yes, I do, Dougal. If he'd been brought up for it, I wouldn't have concealed it, but since Mr. Vincent was good enough to keep him on I wouldn't like any whispers to leak out."

They descended the hill in silence, walked back round Manse Lane to the Crooked House. Dougal switched on her light, then said suddenly: "What's that?"

They listened. A peculiar rustling noise. It came from under the seat by the jessamine. The jessamine was moving.

"Must be a hedgehog . . . have you a torch, Elspeth?"

She brought it, they stood down, peered. Here was a russet-coloured bantam, all fluffed out. As they looked a tiny head poked out from under her.

"Starve the lizards," said Dougal, "It's Martha Moore's Sukey. Complete with family! I wonder where she hatched them. Isn't that clever? As soon as they hatched she knew she'd have to get proper food for them."

"What will I give them?" asked Elspeth.

"Boil two or three eggs hard, mash and crumble them and add breadcrumbs and a little milk. I'd say take them inside for the night. A stoat could get them. I'll get a box from out-bye. Your packing straw is still there, isn't it?"

By the time they got the bantam into it, any air of past sorrows had gone. It was all so practical and domestic. Dougal regarded the seven

chicks in amazement. "Three of them are Australorps. She must have found a nest belonging to one of our hens that lay away, then laid some of her own. Some must be a bit older than the others. Well, I'll be darned! Won't the kids be pleased?"

They certainly were. Jo-anne got there next morning sixty seconds ahead of Robbie by virtue of rushing clean through the Manse orchard in nothing but her pyjamas.

"Uncle Dougal says Sukey's back. With chicks!"

Elspeth wanted to catch up the small pink figure and hug her, but the child might retreat into her shell again, so she just said, "Yes. Come and look ... in this box by the stove."

Robbie tripped over the step and fell in. "You'll catch it, Jo-anne. I was stopping to put slippers on. That grass is soaking wet. O-oh, look at them!"

Elspeth wondered if there was anything more sweet than children gathered adoringly round anything very young and very new. Just so might they have gathered about a Crib in Bethlehem.

She got a towel and began to rub Jo-anne's feet and found a pair of her own ankle-socks for her. Jo-anne submitted. In a few moments Uncle Timothy appeared with Jo-anne's dressing-gown. To Elspeth's relief he did not scold.

Elspeth said to the tall old man, "Perhaps they'd be allowed to have breakfast with me? That way they could watch the chicks for longer. I'll return them as soon as they've had it."

They feasted off bantam eggs and dipped fingers of toast in. Then Robbie Said he'd have to get ready for school and Elspeth carried Jo-

anne over in case she got wet again. But Jo-anne was only a little less aloof.

Struggling against being absorbed into the village life was like trying to resist the tide. Elspeth was sure Dougal must be secretly laughing at her. But it was good. One could not shut oneself away. People here didn't care tuppence that you had only the bare necessities.

In fact they admired her for leaving a good, safe job and striking out on her own. Elspeth accepted invitations in the evenings. She liked people. Some more than others. One she didn't like at all — Mrs. Wilmeston, the Mrs. Grundy Dougal had spoken of.

This particular afternoon she and Georgiana Gainsborough, the doctor's wife were out for a tramp. Mrs. Murray was looking after the doctor's children and answering the phone. Mrs. Murray had decreed it would do Georgiana good.

"Poor Mrs. Wilmeston," said Georgiana, "nobody loves her. I suppose Mr. Wilmeston must have once, but twenty- odd years married to that must have destroyed all romance. She gets my goat. She thinks I'm the most unsuitable wife a doctor could possibly have picked."

Elsbeth was indignant. "How could she? The way you cope! Calming anxious patients down while the doctor is away somewhere else, deciding if they can wait or should you call another doctor . . . telling het-up patients what to do meantime, running that great house with very little help and with it all being such a gay companion to your husband and children. You're such fun."

"Oh, thank you for them kind words. It's just that old Grundy gets me down. Her sly digs. She says I let the profession down."

"But how? I mean—"

"She can't help herself. She has the knack of appearing at my worse moments. It's uncanny. She arrived once as the pan of redcurrant jelly boiled over all down the stove and on to the floor. Another time I was transferring kapok from two old thin mattresses into a new ticking cover for one. I had a film of fluff all over me and couldn't stop sneezing. She said, acidly; 'It doesn't matter with me, of course, but I do think the wife of a professional man ought always to be ready to answer the door and be a credit to him.' And once when she and I crossed swords ... she didn't want that rather shabby little Noel Eddlington included in the Sunday-school play and I saw red and insisted ... she sighed and said: 'Of course red-headed people are so temperamental!' By way of adding insult she added: "Though I do think you could subdue its colour by putting oil on it every night.' "

"Oh, Georgiana, your glorious coppery hair! It's like a newly-minted penny. It must be jealousy. Pity, because if only the poor dear could be induced to wear a bit of makeup and less frumpish clothes she'd not be bad-looking. He seems quite nice."

"Yes, he is. But he's lost in a world of his own. Perhaps he wasn't always that way but got absent-minded as a sort of defence. People put up with her for the sake of him. Poor Pamela, she's right under her mother's thumb. The boy got out of it, the father saw to that. He's farming in the North Island, ostensibly getting experience in dairy farming. One minister, years ago, left here because of her. But oddly enough she never gets under Dougal's skin. He doesn't let her. Says she belongs to the Lord's awkward squad, but seems to think she needs his administration more than some. Of course he and Mark agree on that — that where there is bitterness there must be unhappiness. I'm afraid I'm not so charitable. I sometimes let fly."

"Isn't it a pity there have to be Mrs. Wilmestons in the world?"

"Yes . . . always a snake-in-the-grass. Though she looks more like a ferret, come to think of it. Ready to nose out scandal. Better watch

your step, Elspeth. She probably thinks writers are chancy people, one breath of suspicion that you're at all Bohemian and your reputation would be blasted for ever."

Elspeth shivered. Then they entered Liberty Wood and the beauty of the New Zealand bush, evergreen, mingled with English trees, was all about them. What did Mrs. Wilmeston matter to them?

CHAPTER FIVE

SEPTEMBER gave way to October, narcissi and daffodils and snowdrops yielded place to anemones, ranunculas, lilac and laburnum. Wallflowers scented every overgrown corner. Elspeth discovered hundred of buds on the roses. Next year she would have to prune ruthlessly, but at least as they were they covered up the old rotten sheds.

This was the life — to see a pile of steadily growing pages, to know you'd done more than your quota for the day, to go out and mow lawns and hoe the shrubbery, finding all sorts of sweet surprises pushing up through the leafy mould . . . peonies, lilies, dahlia shoots. To stake the peas, hoe up the potatoes, pull your own radishes to garnish your salads, to cherish Martha Moore's herb-garden, watch your chicks growing daily.

Elspeth's fowl-run made Dougal hoot with laughter. "What a mixture! It looks to me as though the whole parish is saying it with chooks, not flowers. A Brown Leghorn, some Buff Orpingtons, White Rocks, a Silver Wyandotte, two Rhode Island Reds, umpteen bantams . . . God bless my soul, what in the name of fortune have you got a rooster for?" He started to laugh. "Elspeth, you came from town . . . you don't imagine you have to have a rooster to—"

"To have eggs? No, I don't! I'm not as green as that. Before Dad was killed we always had half an acre and lots of hens, though Dad was scientific and only went in for one kind. But I never think a fowl-run looks complete without a rooster, with an iridescent tail, calling his hens when he scratches up a worm, and crowing when they lay. Look at him, isn't he a handsome creature?"

Dougal was still chuckling. "I suppose he is, but you'd better be careful. Black Orpington roosters are notoriously vicious."

"Not Henry," protested Elspeth scooping him up." He's a lamb, he's got the most beautiful disposition. See." she began stroking him.

Dougal blinked. "The darned thing's all but purring. What a lass you are, where did you get him?"

"Old Fergus MacKinnon gave him to me. What are you laughing at?"

"Just that you've cast a spell round the same Fergus MacKinnon . . . 'the most cautious Scot amongst us! He's been singing your praises, and he's not an easy man to please. He enquired of me last week how close our relationship was. I told him no blood relation at all. He might just as well have told me to snap you up while the going was good, he was so relieved. *He* thought he was being tactful, but honestly, he was about as subtle as a steam-roller. So if you can please old Fergus you needn't worry about the rest. Jo-anne's spending a lot of time here. Is she being a nuisance? I mean your time belongs to your typewriter, it's your bread-and-butter."

Elspeth said swiftly: "Oh, you mustn't Stop her. She couldn't be less of a nuisance. Just sits on the step with her teddy-bear. Not a word out of her. In fact, if I stop she's off like a lintie. I've put a padlock on the gate that leads through to the stream, though I don't think it's even more than a trickle, is it? I think she likes the company but doesn't want to be noticed. I'm not going to break through that reserve. A child's personal privacy must be respected."

Dougal took her hands. She'd put the rooster down. He said, smiling, "You've become involved with the Manse family against your will, haven't you, Elspeth Cameron?"

"Yes. Uncle Tim is a darling, a real kindred spirit. His mind is like an index of quotations. And he's got such a wonderful library."

"Were you looking up something this morning?"

"No. I wanted to read a chapter out loud to him, get his opinion. I thought it sounded a bit artificial."

Dougal scowled horribly. "Why didn't you come to me? Or haven't you as high a notion of *my* mind?"

Elsbeth spoke without thinking, "Oh, I couldn't have. It was a—" she stopped dead.

"Go on . . it was a what?"

He laughed. "I do believe you're blushing! What was it you could read to Uncle Tim you couldn't read to me? I know ... it would be a love-scene! Do you have difficulty with your love-scenes, Elspeth? If so, I'd love to help."

"Dougal, stop it! No, I don't usually have trouble. I'm not sweet sixteen, you know. I've had experience. It had gone wrong somewhere. And Dougal MacNab, stop holding my hands! In the fowl-run!"

"Well, where can we go to hold them?"

"Idiot! I mean in full view of the path. Imagine if Mrs. Wilmeston came round."

"I don't care tuppence, my love. I don't care if the whole parish knows I'm courting you. *You've* got the inhibitions, not *me*. I'm an open book for all to read."

"Dougal! It takes two to court. And I'm not having any."

He shook his head in sorrow. "You know, darling, for a writer you use the most shockingly prosaic language. I'm not not having any! You ought to say: 'I'm afraid your suit is hopeless, but I shall always treasure the memory of your devotion, Mr. MacNab.'"

Elspeth uttered an exasperated exclamation, then succumbed to the giggles. "Really, how mad can you get? Anyway, Dougal, what did you want?"

"I'm visiting the Swallows later this afternoon. They like me to stay to tea so I can have a yarn with Reuben, and Mrs. Swallow just rang to say she'd like you to come with me."

Elspeth shot a suspicious glance at him. "Did you engineer that?" -

"I did not. It was all her own idea."

Elspeth said slowly, "I don't like it. It could become the general idea. Partly because this is part of the Manse property, partly because they regard me as a relation of yours. No, I'm not coming."

She stayed adamant.

Elspeth went inside, but couldn't settle. She decided she'd make some pikelets. Robbie often came in after school. Funny, down here they often called them Scotch pancakes or drop scones. She spooned batter on to Martha Moore's old-fashioned girdle and when nearly finished decided she'd make some little pikelet men for the children.

She carefully formed head and legs and arms, cooled them on a tea-towel on the grid, then heard Jo-anne coming in. She stood beside Elspeth watching, as silent as a shadow, while Elspeth buttered one, picked up some tiny currants, arranged them for buttons down his middle, sliced off a piece of crystallised cherry for lips, lemon-peel for nose and eyes, then handed it to the child. Jo-anne took it carefully in her chubby hands, with dimples at the roots of the fingers, and carried it to the doorstep and stood there looking down on it.

Suddenly Elspeth realised the child's face was working, the lips trembling. Jo-anne looked up at her through a blur of tears and said, "My mummy used to make these for me," and cast herself into Elspeth's ready arms.

Elspeth scooped her up, held her close, sat down on the worn step, said, "Oh, Jo-anne, Jo-anne, I know." Instinctively she rocked her, her face against the silken head, and, hardly knowing what she did, began to croon.

After a little, Jo-anne's sobs grew less tumultuous. Elspeth looked up to see Dougal on the path. No doubt he'd been looking for Jo-anne.

He paused, looked uncertainly at them. Elspeth's left hand stopped patting the child's back and waved him away, her eyes eloquent. He went noiselessly, nodding to her in complete understanding. Two people were needed here, not three.

Jo-anne stopped crying. Elspeth sat her up, smoothing the strands of hair off her forehead. She had no experience to guide her, only instinct. Perhaps they'd wrapped it up a bit too much for Jo-anne. Children could take more than one supposed.

She said, matter-of-factly, "My father was killed in an accident too, Jo-anne. And my brother and his wife. My mother was hurt. She was never able to walk much after that. I still miss them. But I think they'd like me to be happy. To have fun."

Jo-anne wriggled. "Where's my wee pikelet man? I'll eat it now. Do you have to type this afternoon, Elspeth?"

"Don't you want me to?"

"No. Uncle's taking me to Mrs. Swallow's. I love going there. She's got a musical box and a big chest of toys. And a brown china cow.

You put the milk in its back and it comes out of the mouth into the cups. He said at dinnertime you might come with us. You will won't you, Elspeth?" She crammed the last of the pikelet into her mouth and bounced up, crumbs going everywhere.

Elspeth said slowly, "I think I will come, Jo-anne. And I noticed they had some red spotted print in the store. I'd like to make you a frock of it. Would you like red?"

Jo-anne's face lit up. "Could I have a pinafore frock? With a white blouse with puffed sleeves and lace under it. Like Jenny Robertson's — only hers is blue."

"Yes. Spotted muslin, with two little collars edged with the lace and a frilly petticoat for underneath. We could get a pattern at the store when we go to the Swallows. We'll go over to the Manse now and I'll ask Uncle Timothy to feed my hens at half-past four. Is Robbie coming for tea after school?"

"No. He's going to Sammy Moffat's birthday party."

Dougal's face was a study when Elspeth appeared and said airily: "I've changed my mind, I'm coming with you, but we want to stop off at the store. Jo-anne, off you go and wash your face. Bring your hairbrush and ribbon out here to me. Mrs. Donovan's in the middle of her baking." As the child ran off, she said, "Donny, I've promised her a new frock. I'm not very fond of sewing, but I don't mind making little things. Would it be all right with you?"

"It would and all, Elspeth. I don't mind mending and darning, but I can't abide dressmaking. I was very tempted to ask if- you were any good at it, but I didn't like to cut into your time."

Another hurdle taken. Elspeth and Dougal walked off into his study. Elspeth told him briefly what had occurred. Dougal nodded.

"I thought it was something like that." His eyes softened. "Did I not tell you, you had cast a spell on us all?"

Elsbeth was glad he said no more. It had been an emotional half-hour and she must go carefully with Jo-anne, but once the barriers had been lowered she did not think they would be raised again.

"I appreciate the dressmaking, Elspeth, though I hope it won't hold up your work. Donny's a good sort and I'm lucky to have her, but she hasn't the ghost of a notion how to dress Jo-anne."

"I know she works on the principle of getting things big enough to grow into and doesn't bother shortening. No child looks her best in a frock too long, and besides, Donny gets all the wrong colours — dull ones, or pastels. Jo-anne wants the vivid colours, she looks better in her denim overalls than her frocks."

Dougal looked pleased. "I bought those myself — at the chain stores."

Elsbeth said cautiously, "But don't expect me to take full charge of her wardrobe immediately. Donny is a darling, but I don't want to risk offending her."

"You aren't likely to. You have a way with you, Miss Cameron, and Donny approves of you."

"I'm afraid you're biased. Just because you see me through rosy spectacles, Dougal, you think everybody must."

Dougal didn't take the car, he'd already paid two brief calls straight after lunch. He stopped off at the village store with them.

He said, "Put the cost down on the Manse account."

Elspeth's eyes gleamed fiercely. "I'll do nothing of the kind. This is a gift. And don't tell me I can't afford it, I can. I had two short stories accepted last week."

"You'll soon spend the doings at this rate."

"Please, Dougall. It's not much of an existence if you spend it all on yourself."

He wisely left it at that.

They ran slap-bang into Mrs. Wilmeston as they came out. She said, her small beady eyes darting from one to the other, small Jo-anne between them, swinging on their hands, "Having an afternoon off, are you?"

Dougal said easily, "Not really. I've come back from paying a couple of calls to get Elspeth and Jo-anne to go with me to the Swallows. We're having dinner with them. It's not like visiting on the farms, you know, where the menfolk can spare time in mid-afternoon. Mr. Swallow doesn't shut till five."

Mrs. Wilmeston looked put out. She went on, fixing Elspeth with a gimlet eye, "I'd not realised you went visiting with our minister."

Dougal answered for her, "First time she has — she hasn't time as a rule. She's put up a strong resistance, but it looks as if she has succumbed now. Fair-acre is really too hospitable a place for anyone trying to earn their living with their pen. Elspeth's been asked to join the Women's Institute, the Drama Group, the Women's Division, the Presbyterian Women's Association and the choir."

"Fortunately, other than making a joyful noise unto the Lord, I can't sing," said Elspeth, "so that lets me out of that."

"I just can't understand anyone not liking music," said Mrs. Wilmeston. "I think one must be right out of touch with the meaning of the universe."

"Elspeth didn't say she didn't like music, Mrs. Wilmeston. She said she couldn't sing. Though even that's not correct. She thinks she can't and has no confidence, but she keeps in tune perfectly. We often hear her singing in her garden."

Elspeth said hastily, "But your daughter has a lovely voice, Mrs. Wilmeston. That solo last week was beautiful."

Mrs. Wilmeston sounded a little mollified. "Pamela *has* a lovely voice. Of course she's intensely musical. Old Mr. Downie, Mr. MacNab's predecessor, always used to say what a wonderful minister's wife she would make . . . teaching Sunday-school, playing the organ, singing in the choir."

"So she would," agreed Elspeth sincerely, and was amazed to see Dougal scowling.

Mrs. Wilmeston said, rather reluctantly, "Well, if Miss Cameron is making a round of calls with you, perhaps you would bring her with you on a visit to me next week."

With inner misgivings they accepted and escaped.

Mrs. Swallow had seen it from her window. She was chuckling. "Poor soul, she'll be that jealous to think you've brought Miss Cameron here first. Wretched upstart of a woman. Likes to queen it over everyone on account of her husband owning the biggest farm in the place. Calls it a sheep-station. I said to her once, 'None o' these farms round here is big enough to be called a station. It's always been Wilmeston's farm and Wilmeston's farm it always will be, mark my words, in spite of you putting Manor Hill on the gate!' Manor Hill

indeed! I reckon poor John Wilmeston must've had his blinkers on the night he proposed to yon woman.

Mrs. Swallow swept on. "'the minister's not saying a word. Of course he can't poor man. He's here to minister to us all, heaven help him. Never mind, if some of us let off a bit of steam about yon grizzle-pot at times, I reckon it sort of does something for him. I'd never have done for a minister's wife. I canna always hold my tongue.

"But come awa' in. Jo-anne, you can get out the box of tricks. You know fine where it is. Last time you were here you put everything away so neatly, I've decided this time you can have the postcard album to look at. I don't let children under school age have it usually, but I was downright pleased with you. It was Mr. Swallow's mother's."

Not only Jo-anne found it interesting. Elspeth did too. It went back to the gay nineties, Valentines and all.

Mr. Swallow bustled in from the shop to say hullo, an immense man, girdled with a blue-and-white striped apron, flourishing a knife as he talked. He presented Jo-anne with a cold saveloy which she ate solemnly and with great relish.

When he closed the shop he disappeared upstairs and came down half an hour later in his Sunday best, obviously freshly bathed and shaved. He had squeaky boots, a startling tie and a shining red face.

"Now, don't forget when you're going, there's a T-bone steak for Miss Cameron and a leg o' pork for the Manse."

They went home, not too late because of Jo-anne, in the scented dusk. In Manse Lane thrushes were whistling in the sycamores, silver birches and hazels were displaying catkins, and a little breeze whispered of sea and mountain, plain and river.

Elspeth said, "I've not felt so drowsily content since I was a child. I've been whisked right back into my grandmother's world ... the old organ, the plush photo-frames, the rocking-chair, the pen-painted cushions, the bobbles on the mantelpiece cover ... a lovely, safe, permanent sort of world. Of course it could be that I'm just replete. I've not eaten like that for years, either. Did you ever see so much food? Caramel pie, lemon pie with cream, home-made bath buns, three kinds of jam, and honey-in-the-comb . . . corned mutton, pork, beetroot, cucumber pickle, scones and pikelets. And she was so disappointed if you refused anything. As for the conversation . . . wasn't it wonderful?"

Dougal started to laugh. "Isn't he the man for alliteration? And she loves it, beams on him fondly, as if he were an only child saying a piece. When he started about that house — the one set back off the road — and he boomed out: 'Positively privileged with perfect and peaceful privacy,' I dared not catch your eye. And blow me down if you didn't start talking back in the same strain, you and your 'Marvellous morning mists on the Maungatuas!' Hulloo, here's someone nearly asleep on her feet. Up you come, sweetheart." He swung Jo-anne to his shoulder. "Come in in and put her to bed, Elspeth. I've got to go and pick Robbie up at eight and Mrs. Donovan's was going to Margaret Murray's. They're great cronies." As Elspeth hesitated he added impatiently: "Uncle Timothy is home to chaperon us." Elspeth gave in.

In the weeks that followed she had the heart-warming experience of knowing herself accepted. When the baker's assistant developed boils she helped out for a fortnight at the bakery, on full wages. She went up often to the Gains- boroughs' to baby-sit. Mrs. Donovan got her to do all the shopping for Jo-anne's summer wardrobe. Elspeth bought some and made some. The Manse purse wasn't always adequate and it was cheaper to make. There had been some money for Jo-anne and Robbie from their parents, but Dougal had invested it against the time when they might need higher education.

"I might have a family of my own by then," he said to Elspeth, twinkling, "so I thought there was no need to draw on it now when expenses are not so heavy." Elspeth hurriedly disengaged her eyes.

Oddly enough, though her time was taken up with so many local activities, she found she wrote the quicker for it. When she had had all day she had slowed her pace. Happiness was seeping into her with the early summer sunshine. Dougal noticed the change in her and continued to bide his time.

It was Monday and Elspeth was waiting for the morning bus. A car turned the corner and drew up. Dougal.

"Going into Dunedin?"

Her eyes were starry. "Yes, I'm celebrating. Dougal, I've been translated!"

He put back his head and laughed. "What a Biblical sound that has. But I know what you mean. What language?"

"Into German. And others may follow. Oh, Dougal, I love to think people all over the world will read my books."

"Good show . . . but hop in, the bus is nearly due, and if we aren't careful half the parish will converge on us and we'll have to take them too."

"Goodness, I've been thinking you the perfect minister, a real father to the flock!"

He accelerated and drove off. "I need you to myself sometimes. Good heavens, girl, driving is the only chance. Not even Mrs. Grundy can. raise her brows over that. Seeing you have this thing about preserving my reputation. Besides, I might as well be devastatingly candid and

confess I love my parishioners dearly six days a week . . . but on Mondays! What do you aim to do by way of celebrating, Elspeth?"

The green eye? sparkled. "I'm buying a carpet for the parlour and a couple of easy chairs and an oval table. It's more than just the translation, Dougal. On Saturday I got a letter from Patty and Paul with a fifty-pound draft in it. They worded it so that I couldn't refuse it. It means so much to them to pay me back something. It means more than that to me."

She stopped. He turned his head and saw the green eyes were brimming in tears. "It means that Paul is now a man."

Dougal's hand touched hers fleetingly. "Good show." If he had said: "So he should," Elspeth would have been hurt.

He said now, "Elspeth, how would you like to drive in? I'd miss driving horribly if I had to do without the car. You'd soon get the feel of these gears."

"I'd love to. Which way are we going? Mosgiel and the Main South Road?"

"No, through Outram and Outram Glen and over Three- Mile-Hill. It's very lovely. Even some instances of loose- stone walls. It's forested too, all larch and pine, and a few silver birches."

"Would you take it before we get right into the traffic? I don't know Dunedin well enough."

He nodded. They changed seats, Elspeth loving the feel of the wheel under her fingers. The plains were richly chequered, the turf emerald, most of the farmhouses modern, wealthy-looking, with here and there the old wooden dormer- windowed houses of pioneer days. Some were charmingly restored.

Dougal said: "I've a ministers' meeting this afternoon, that's why the dog-collar — but the morning is mine, so I'll come round the shops with you. Are you after secondhand chairs and table?"

"Yes, though the carpet square I want new. Hadn't you planned to do anything this morning?"

"I wasn't going in till this afternoon. I caught a glimpse of you dressed for town, going along Manse Lane, and I was out of my milking things and into these in a jiffy."

He realised Elspeth was in a mellow mood. She didn't even mind when a salesman took them for man and wife. He gave her lunch at Cherry Lodge, then dropped her in the city, arranging to meet her at four-thirty for a late cup of tea before driving back. "At the Bluff King Hal. Try for a corner window seat."

Elspeth prowled round the shops, mostly drapery ones, enjoying the familiar atmosphere. She began to try on hats.

Ah, here was a red. Elspeth tried it on, M'mm. Not too bad. She picked up a mirror, gazed anxiously at the back of it. It was very nice with this blue suit, would go with her black and with green and—

A voice in her ear, a masculine one, said in a whisper, "Not red! You mustn't. Red excites the passion!"

She swung round. "Nigel! You idiot! Creeping up on me like that!"

He grinned. "What a greeting! And here was I thinking absence may have made the heart grow fonder. I'm coming out to have dinner with you. How's the cottage and the rural life — palling yet?"

"Palling? Oh, no, it's enchanting."

He grimaced. "That does nothing for me. I'd hoped you'd been bored to tears. Oh, well, finding you like this is marvellous. Saves me coming out and making enquiries. I thought the store or Post Office would be bound to know where one Elspeth Cameron, spinster and author, lived. I've been patient too long. I respected your wishes and didn't write, but I couldn't stand it any longer. I'm doing the south a month earlier than usual. This is my last call for the day. I thought what fantastic luck when I caught sight of you in the mirror. I was just leaving the hoisery department. Are you buying that hat?"

Elspeth nodded, Nigel crooked a finger to summons a salesgirl, said: "The lady's taking this," and when she'd paid for it, added, "I've my car in town, but I suppose you've got yours?"

She hesitated. "No-o. I came in with a friend. Nigel, I won't ask you to dinner at Fair-acre Valley. I — I simply don't want to start all that up again ... because it's not fair to you. I've found my niche in life. I'll have a cup of tea with you — quite quickly — at a coffee bar or some such place. Because I've to meet this friend at four-thirty."

"Where?"

"At the Bluff King Hal. But—"

"But me no buts. I'll put my stuff back in my sample- rooms and I'll stand you and your friend tea. What's her name?"

"It's not a her. A him. My next-door neighbour — but—"

"I said no buts. Time your old friends met your new."

Elspeth didn't want Nigel out in Fair-acre. He didn't belong there. And she certainly didn't want him raising surprised and possibly supercilious eyebrows over her lack of possessions. He'd be curious,

and while she didn't mind Dougal MacNab knowing about Paul, she didn't want anyone else to have an inkling.

They argued all the way to the sample-rooms and back to the King Hal. There they told the receptionist they were waiting for a friend and continued to argue.

Dougal MacNab came in, was told where Elspeth was sitting and went across to the alcove indicated. He hung up his hat behind the curtain and heard Elspeth's voice say most seriously: "Nigel, I've completely changed. I feel I've come bade to what I was before — before you know what. I've lost my cynicism. I can believe in people again. I don't want to look back. Please don't think me ungrateful! But the way you're going on is making me feel quite guilty. And why should I? After all, we both agreed, at the onset, that we were not the marrying kind. That the sort of association we formed suited us both — filled in a few lonely hours — but was never a grand passion. That we were each of us free to end it any time we thought it wise. Well, I want to be completely free now. So please, no hurt feelings. You taught me a lot, Nigel. I'd never have been able to write as I have without you. You know, don't you, that for a while the source of inspiration dried up. Till you taught me that life was a matter of renewed — if different — experience. But I'm now making an entirely new life for myself."

Dougal stood as if rooted there. He eavesdropped at first because it wasn't the sort of conversation you could break into without embarrassing them. But he also listened in because he could not help himself. This concerned Elspeth and her refusal of himself . . . And maybe it was as good a reason for her not wanting to marry a minister as could be.

He reacted from the thought most violently, even as it took possession of his mind. He heard Nigel say something in return and realised he mustn't let them know he had overheard. He turned very

quietly, for so big a man, threaded through some tables and came up to them in full view this time.

Elspeth had a high colour and her hands were playing with a cake-fork. She was glad to see him with the gladness that meant only relief from a conversation that had been a strain.

"Oh, there you are, Dougal. Nigel, this is the Reverend Dougal MacNab, of St. Enoch's Manse, Fair-acre. Dougal, this is Nigel Montrose, a former business colleague of mine."

Business colleague! thought Dougal, greeting him.

Nigel said: "I've seen you before . . . coming out of Elspeth's office." He turned to Elspeth, a line between his dark brows. "How odd ... I thought you were a farmer. Elspeth, didn't you say he was doing something on television about aerial top-dressing?"

She achieved a laugh. "That was my mistake. He wasn't wearing his collar, and I took him for a church manager. The Manse is an old homestead and my cottage is in the same grounds."

"I see." Nigel's tone was thoughtful. Dougal thought he probably saw more than Elspeth wanted him to.

Dougal said crisply: "I hope you haven't made any plans for tonight. You and I are invited to have dinner at First Church Manse, Elspeth. And I've seats for a film at the Regent after. I've rung Uncle Tim and he's seeing to your hens."

Thereafter it went most amicably. Nigel was always able to handle conversation well and Dougal's training stood him in good stead ... but there was that faint hint of male antagonism in the air.

When Dougal was settling the bill Nigel said to Elspeth: "Always had a soft spot for ministers, didn't you? Think it will work this time? I didn't think you'd have taken the risk of pious condemnation again."

She said quickly, because Dougal was nearing and she didn't know how keen his hearing was, "It doesn't come into this. We're merely good friends."

They parted in the street below and then Dougal guided her into Moray Place and round to Bell Hill to the magnificent edifice of First Church, built where Thomas Burns had brought his flock, after the Disruption in Scotland, more than a century before.

Elspeth felt distrait, Dougal seemed preoccupied, but they each roused out of their thoughts from consideration for their hosts and the light comedy they saw set all problems temporarily at bay.

Nevertheless Elspeth felt curiously exhausted when at last they reached home. Dougal put on her light, stood looking down on her as if seeking for words and not finding them. She looked up at him, noticed how the moonlight caught his fair, stubbly hair and turned it to silver. He looked very tired. There were deep lines etched from mouth to chin. Why?

But of course any man who preached as Dougal did must feel drained of energy on Mondays. It wasn't an easy life, his, not too bad, perhaps, as long as he had Mrs. Donovan, but she was getting on and wouldn't always want to cope with so young a family. If ever a man needed a wife, he did.

Elspeth knew a moment of keenest regret that their ways must lie apart. She went to bed and fell asleep instantly.

But across at the Manse Dougal's light stayed on in his study till the wee small hours. He'd tried to read, he'd even tried to work on next Sunday's sermon . . . usually he could lose himself in work ... but he crumpled what he'd written into the waste-paper basket. If only he *knew*. It was one thing thinking that probably Elspeth had had some unfortunate experience long ago, in her foolish youth. It was quite another thing meeting someone concerned intimately in her past. He'd thought it no more than some folly Elspeth had exaggerated. But today the conversation had been very serious.

His mind went back to the night on Liberty Hill. "I'm no fit bride for a minister," she'd said. She hadn't tried to conceal anything.

Today he'd heard her say: "We both agreed we were not the marrying kind . . . filled in a few lonely hours . . . , never a grand passion . . ." Later that fellow Montrose had asked her: "Think it will work this time? Didn't think you'd have taken the risk of pious condemnation again."

What did it add up to? He didn't know. If he forced her to tell him now, he had an idea that she would leave Fair-acre Valley. So he wouldn't risk it. He'd have to leave it to time. But, as far as Elspeth Cameron was concerned, Dougal MacNab was not a patient man.

Finally he got up, stretched himself, went quietly across to the french windows, unlatched them, and stepped outside.

Dougal stood gazing out over the colourless plain, his hand on the old *kauri* rail of the veranda. Suddenly, over Saddle Hill, the sun came up, striking great golden bars through the mists of the morning. A little wind stirred the cabbage-tree leaves, the scent of stock rose up to him from the garden, over the macrocarpa hedge he could see the bricks of Elspeth's chimney. Soon she would rise, light her old stove to cook her breakfast, put in more slogging hours at her typewriter, go running down the village street to see if Mrs. Brown

wanted her cow milked, find time to embroider rosebuds on Jo-anne's frilly petticoat . . . tease Uncle Tim, drop in for half an hour in the evening to old Miss Malloch's to read her the paper . . . pick mulberry leaves for Robbie's voracious silkworms . . . suddenly Dougal MacNab knew that whatever lay behind her in the past, he still loved Elspeth Cameron and always would ...

CHAPTER SIX

THE peonies came out in November, the roses and carnations. The hawthorn hedges of Fair-acre Valley became a delight of ivory-and-rose, catmint bloomed luxuriously round the brick, paths of the little Crooked House living- stone daisies patched the drier beds with vivid colour, self- grown sweet peas waved out over the plots and had to have wire-netting hastily erected for them, fuchsias and daisies rioted everywhere^ the geraniums blazed against the shabby walls . . the Manse pullets went into a neck moult for some reason . . . one of Elspeth's White Rocks broke its leg, but Elspeth managed to splint it and it hopped round like a man with a wooden leg; the Manse cow, Gertrude, choked on a big rubber ball she found in the long grass when nobody but Elspeth was home and Elspeth managed to get it out of her throat unaided. There wasn't time to call anyone.

When Dougal and Uncle Tim got home, Elspeth was sitting under the big oak crying because she'd been terrified Gertrude was going to choke, and Gertrude was lying down placidly chewing. Mrs. Swallow said she believed there was no situation Elspeth wouldn't tackle.

Dougal added to himself: Except marrying a minister.

There was always something doing in Fair-acre. Elspeth didn't know how she had ever existed in town . . . helping the children practise their Christmas carols, making fudge and toffee for the sale of work, discovering who grew the best irises and worst snapdragons in the district, having old Fergus MacKinnon visit the Crooked House to read poetry aloud, to find beneath his apparent crustiness a shy idealism, to have him talk about his young wife, Angela, dead this long time since, as if he had seen her just yesterday . . . sharing in all the minor and major joys of the Manse, per Jo-anne and Robbie.

Suddenly Christmas was upon them. Dougal had brought over the children's presents to be hidden in Elspeth's spare room.

Elsbeth gazed at them. The doll she knew was from Uncle Timothy, but that Pram must have cost Dougal something. And Robbie had the most exciting street-trolley with brakes and number-plates and all sorts of gadgets, gears and ornaments. There were umpteen books and dozens of small things, dearest of all to any child's heart.

She asked Uncle Tim straight out one day she was at the Manse.

"Uncle Tim, how has Dougal afforded all those things ? He's had to go in for a new car — I know perfectly well he had to raise an overdraft — that will take some paying back. Manse cars always wear out before they're paid for."

Uncle Tim took her arm, led her to Dougal's study and pointed to a shelf where the books were all falling awry. A fortnight ago the shelves had been jammed and Dougal had been talking about making extra shelves.

"He sold a set of books . . . a dearly-loved set."

Elsbeth felt the tears start to her eyes. Back home she sat thinking about it. No,, he wasn't like Perry. Perry had been spoilt, of course, by an over-indulgent mother. Dougal was generous to a fault.

Would he also be more generous in other ways? In his attitude towards certain things. She didn't know.

Mrs. Donovan slipped across one night. "Elsbeth, I'd dearly love to be able to spend Christmas at home in Invercargill with my daughter. She's expecting again and this time isn't so well. I'd like to be able to help her for a few days beforehand. Any chance of you keeping house at the Manse. With Mr. MacMaster there it would be all right. They all go away to their beach cottage at Karitane after New Year and they just manage for themselves out there. I have a holiday with

Heather. Mr. MacNab always likes to have the first Sunday of the New Year with his people. Are you frightfully busy on a book?"

Elsbeth seized the chance. She was going to be lonely this Christmas. You needed children at that season.

"I'd love it, Donny. My sister is going to Nelson for Christmas and they wanted me to go with them, but she had a big operation just before I came here and I feel they need quiet and solitude. If I can tell her I'm keeping house at the Manse she'll stop worrying."

Dougal made one stipulation and was adamant about it He would pay Elspeth the housekeeper's wage.

"But, Dougal, my writing has been paying. I've had a whole lot in at once, so I can afford to take a spell."

He smiled down on her. "I know you've had a lot of acceptances. But you've a lot of leeway to make up. You have your whole cottage to furnish, and it's going to take a lot of desk-work and creative energy before you build up enough to buy a car again. You're far too independent for a woman. You've always shouldered the burdens of your family after your father's death. Well, you aren't going to shoulder any of mine."

Elsbeth liked it. In fact she was uneasily aware that she liked far too much about Dougal. She kept finding herself thinking what a marvellous escape she'd had when her engagement to Perry was broken. Perry would have leaned on her all her life long. How much she had been in love with him she didn't know. Perhaps it had been too idealistic. Perhaps she had 'been in love with love.

Elsbeth bent to savour the perfume of one of her Etoile de Holland red roses. Nothing to quite equal Etoile. She went on thinking about Dougal. Very much master in his own house . . . very much a pastoral

minister, visiting his flock regularly, even when weary to the point of exhaustion; running a few sheep and a cow and pig in the Manse glebe, to help with the Children's expenses; renting that paddock and sowing potatoes . . . doing even more for Jo-anne and Robbie than a father would have, because he didn't want the children to prove too much for Mrs. Donovan. Yet, with all this, not neglecting his study hours.

You just couldn't help admiring a man like that. This time it wasn't a case of fascination . . . this time it wasn't a case of being in love with love ... it was a case of loving!

Elsbeth got such a shock as she realised what she was thinking that she let her flower-trug and scissors drop, scattering roses and candytuft all over the flower-bed. She stood there unseeing, her hands clenched at her sides. *A case of loving.*

And there could be no future in it.

It wasn't a matter of pride. Or of refusing ever again to put herself in the position of having a man say to her: "Haven't you any idea of how people talk about a minister's wife? One breath of scandal and a man's career is finished. Talk about the fierce light that beats upon a throne . . . it's nothing to the light that beats upon a pulpit. You ought to have realised that."

No, it wasn't that she was afraid of the same sort of condemnation from Dougal. He would react very differently, she knew. It was simply that when true love came into your heart, you considered the beloved first. She loved Dougal so much that she would never link her life with his in case it brought hurtful gossip about his name and affected his ministry. The world had need of ministers of the calibre of Dougal MacNab.

Elspeth got down on her knees to gather up the roses. Why did it have to happen ? Why must she fall in love with another minister? And he needed her so, for himself, for the children. But she must turn away from all he offered . . . lest harm befall him.

She threw herself into all the old-timey preparations for Christmas and managed to put most of what Dougal paid her back into goodies for the festive season and clothes for the children. Dougal didn't have a clue about the cost of clothing, and as Rose Sparrow was always saying: "What the eye can't see the heart can't grieve over."

But now it was Christmas Eve. The Manse had never looked so gay. Elspeth had sent up to Hoodman's for a box of slightly shopworn Christmas decorations that had lain in a corner of the window-dresser's reserve for two or three years.

They had gladly sent them down. So the Manse was decorated in every room with sleighs and reindeers, imitation holly and Christmas bells. Dougal and Uncle Tim had brought in masses of spruce and larch and pine and Elspeth had scattered so much imitation snow and glitter over the greenery that the whole house sparkled.

Robbie said now, "I wish we had Christmas in winter instead of summer ... it looks more Christmassy, and besides, you can eat more. It's really too hot for plum- pudding in December."

Elspeth said, "I think you're right. What say we keep our puddings and just have fruit salad after our lamb and green peas?"

Robbie looked horrified. "Oh, no! You can't get threepences out of fruit salad."

Dougal had gone out after dinner with some little gifts from the church for elderly and shut-in folk. The children were helping Elspeth ice some biscuits with Christmas motifs and were as full of excitement as a bottle of ginger-pop. She looked out of the window. "Goodness, what a heavy cloud over Candy Hill. You've gone and magicked up a winter storm, Robbie my lad."

Jo-anne said, "*I* don't want it to rain — I've asked Santa for a new bathing-suit and Uncle Dougal said he'd take us to Outram Glen after Christmas Dinner if it was hot."

"Well, it's a jolly good job none of our wishes has an effect on the Weather Man — he does as he pleases. Now, wash your hands and we'll go and sing our carols to Uncle Tim. But if you want to sing Good King Wenceslas he'll have to play it for you. I've practised all the others, but I can't manage that. I was never much good on the piano."

"You are so," vowed Jo-anne who was tremendously partisan and clannish. "I think you play better than Pam Wilmeston."

Elspeth giggled. "Never let her mother hear you say so, pet. Now after our carols we'll play hunt-the-thimble and I-spy-with-my-little-eye and you can have a special supper. . . no, I will not tell you what, it's a surprise ... but you can watch me make them, and then baths and bed."

The surprise was a waffle-iron Elspeth had bought. Uncle Tim ate as many, smothered in butterscotch sauce, as the children. Elspeth got them to bed just as the storm broke in real earnest, with thunder and lightning and finally hail, which mercifully did not last long.

"I hope Dougal took his mackintosh," said Elspeth, returning to find Uncle Tim had lit the fire. She sat on the couch beside him.

"If not someone will lend him one." Uncle Tim fished under a cushion, brought out a tissue-wrapped parcel, small enough to be intriguing, and put it in her hands.

"This is to wish you a merry Christmas, Elspeth. It's Miriam's ring. There's never been anyone I could bear to give it to, till now."

She opened it up, sat in the firelight looking down on the beautiful opal sparkling back at her with flames of coral and sea-blue and jade-green in its milky depths.

Uncle Tim's voice said in her ear as he bent over it too, "You and Miriam are two of a kind. Steel-true, blade- straight."

A shining tear fell on to the ring. Elspeth brushed it away, looked up. "Oh, Uncle Timothy, you see me through rose-coloured spectacles. How I'll treasure this. It's the honour of it that I appreciate."

She kissed him, just as the daughter Timothy MacMaster had never had might have kissed him. Elspeth slipped the ring on to a finger of her right hand, held it up to the light, admiring it. "This is the loveliest Christmas I've ever had ... the children, still believing in the magic of it, you and this lovely old house."

"And Dougal," said Timothy MacMaster.

Elspeth flushed, looked down.

Uncle Tim took her chin, forced it round.

"I said: *'And Dougal.'*" There was something about Uncle Tim's gaze that was compelling. You couldn't evade it or the point he'd made.

She said slowly: "I'm trying *not* to depend on Dougal for my happiness, Uncle Tim."

He looked astonished. "Why ever not? If ever two people were made for each other it's you and Dougal."

Elspeth was distressed and showed it. "No, don't say it, Uncle Tim. If I'd known this was going to happen I'd never have come here."

"Why not?" His tone was incredulous.

"Because I can't ever marry a minister, Uncle Tim."

He hesitated, because her tone was so serious. "But lots of girls think they could never be the mistress-of-the-manse type, in fact even my Miriam did. I always think of that hymn . . . you know . . . "Those who fain would serve him best are conscious most of wrong within'." He chuckled. "Miriam said, 'The only thing right about me is my name—it's a biblical one. Honestly, Timothy, I'd rather you were an explorer ... I'd follow you into equatorial Africa or into the jungles of New Guinea rather than into a manse.' But she got over that and a fine minister's wife she made too. She wasn't reserved and stand-offish and over-dignified. People came and told her their troubles and never felt embarrassed because they knew she too wasn't always wise; that she sometimes erred in judgment; that she too sometimes lost her temper.

"That's all that really matters in being a minister's wife, Elspeth, it's not a case of being able to preside over meetings with unruffled aplomb, or being a perfect housekeeper, able to manage on a shoestring. As long as you can meet people with love and sympathy in their lowest moments, you'll do. So if that was what was holding you back, it needn't."

Elspeth looked down on her hands, lacing and unlacing the fingers. She said, slowly, painfully, "That wasn't what I meant, Uncle Tim. I know I wouldn't be a very orthodox minister's wife but I don't think that would have mattered. Only if Dougal married me his career

would suffer somewhere, some time. I'd only bring him a smirched name and —I wouldn't do that to him."

Uncle Timothy said: "Want to tell me?"

"No. Sorry, Uncle Tim. Because it wouldn't make any difference. Dougal's too fine a man to be caught up in anything like this. I've no intention of discussing it with him, or with anyone, because nothing could undo what happened.

'It's one thing helping out at the Manse and another becoming a minister's wife."

Uncle Timothy patted her hand. "Very well, my dear. I won't probe into anything that might cause you pain, and I'm a great believer in time taking care of things."

The door bell rang. Elspeth groaned. "Oh, no! Not a caller at this time of night. Dougal will be tired and won't want visitors when he gets in. What a week he's had."

"Perhaps it *is* Dougal. He might have forgotten his front door key."

"But wouldn't he just come round to the back?"

"Have you ever walked under those chestnuts when it's raining? It's as good as a shower-bath. My bet is that it is Dougal."

Elspeth got up. "Well, better that than a visitor. It's after ten."

She went along the back passage, into the square front hall, and opened the door.

Dougal stepped in wearing a mackintosh two inches too small in the sleeves for him. He took it off, threw it on a hook and caught her in a fierce embrace there was no resisting.

Elspeth was taken absolutely unawares. She had a glimpse of dancing blue eyes above her before his mouth came down on hers.

Of what use to discipline yourself during all those other moments, she thought bewilderingly, when you got caught off-balance like that, with no time to prepare yourself, to steel against showing any feeling?

Magic swept her, something that far transcended any other moment of enchantment. She knew her heart was racing, though some of that thudding was coming from Dougal's, she thought.

Slowly he took his mouth from hers, his eyes twinkling, his arms still holding her close. She pulled herself together. This would never do. There had been one brief, betraying moment of response, she knew, but now she must give him no encouragement.

She managed a shocked: "Dougal! Whatever's come over you?"

He chuckled, not releasing her. "How well you put it. . . though it's a case of something having come over *you*! Look up, Elspeth."

Puzzled, she looked up. There, on the chandelier, was a huge bunch of imitation mistletoe."

Dougal sat down in his big chair, Elspeth took her seat by Uncle Tim. Dougal removed his soaking shoes, put on dry socks and the slippers Elspeth had put by the hearth.

Uncle Timothy leaned forward, his expression mild and innocent. "Did you forget your key, my boy?"

Dougal hesitated a fraction, Uncle Timothy said quickly: "Or was that big bunch of mistletoe I saw you tying up before you went out that delayed you so long?"

Elspeth had never seen Dougal blush before or appear at a loss. She burst out laughing.

Dougal glared at her. "Unfeeling wretch! And as for you, Uncle Tim, you ought to know better. You've no tact!"

They all laughed then.

Uncle Tim got up, "I'm off for bed, those children will be up at first light. Elspeth, would you bring me a cup of tea in bed? Nothing to eat."

He bent down, kissed her goodnight, said in the direction of Dougal's chair, "At my age one doesn't need mistletoe for an excuse. Goodnight, both of you."

Dougal heard him going into the kitchen, looked at Elspeth, said, "He's not after aspirin or anything, is he? I'll go and see."

Uncle Timothy was just after a bedside glass of water. Dougal said: "Are you all right? Going off early, I mean, and not wanting supper?"

Uncle Timothy grinned. "Elspeth made the children waffles with butterscotch sauce and I ate far more of them than any man over seventy ought to. As to going off early, it's pure philanthropy. You need a bit of time to yourself to do your courting in! If it's not parishioners and children, it's uncles and housekeeper's . . . and Elspeth's so mighty careful about your reputation she won't entertain you alone. Mind you, she's right there." Uncle Timothy looked mischievous. "If I were twenty-five years younger, dear nephew, I'd be your rival."

Dougal came back grinning. "No, he's all right, Elspeth. Just thinks I need time to do my courting in."

Elsbeth Shot to her feet. "I must switch my waffle-iron on," she said and stalked out to the kitchen, followed by Dougal.

She reached for a mixing-bowl, said, turning and peering suspiciously at Dougal, "Dougal, I begin to have my suspicions ! Have your parishioners been indulging the meenister in a wee drachm?"

He laughed. "You'd have picked it on my breath a few moments ago, wouldn't you, lass?"

She went a little pink. "What's wrong with you?" she demanded.

"I'm changing my tactics. I've been patient, ever since October. Thought I'd let you get to know me, trust me."

"Its not time, I need, Dougal, it's—"

He leaned forward and twitched the bowl from her. 'Oh, that's good. I thought it was taking a gey long time, as Margaret Murray would say, to fall in love with me. But if—"

Elsbeth snatched the bowl back. "You're deliberately misunderstanding me! I'm *not* marrying a minister, and that's all there is to be said!" She made a horrible whirring sound with the egg-beater. When she put it down. Dougal said reproachfully, "The cave-men had it easier. *They* didn't have to compete with egg-beaters . . . only the sighing of the wind in the immemorial elms . . . and they just grabbed their women by the hair and bore them off. I've actually got you under my roof, but for all the headway I'm making you might be at the South Pole. Elspeth, aren't you getting over any of your inhibitions?"

Elsbeth turned out a lovely crisp, lattice-patterned waffle. Serve him right if she burned some. She said, anxiously stirring the butterscotch

sauce, then leaving it to pour more batter, "I haven't any inhibitions . . . it's other people's I'm worried about. To be quite candid, Dougal, Mrs. Wilmeston is capable of giving any minister's wife who wasn't as narrow as a piece of cotton an uncomfortable time, but if she once found out about *me* . . . she'd give you *hell*." She stopped, looking distracted, said, "Now look what you've done . . . that sauce is sticking. Do something about it, Dougal, because the waffle has got to come off."

Dougal saved the situation by tipping the sauce into another pan before the burnt flavour got right through. He stirred it thoroughly, turned it into a jug, picked up the tray, said, "Come on, girl, back to the fire. It's a much more romantic setting."

"There's not going to be any romance. I just want my waffles and to get off to bed." She was experiencing a desire to burst into tears.

When they had finished their waffles, Douglas slid open the glass doors of a bookcase, took out a paper-wrapped parcel, came over to the couch, sat down beside her and said; "The only real gift from a man to his woman is jewellery . . . something to lie against her skin , . . but meantime I thought you might like this from me."

With trembling hands she undid it. It felt like a picture. Was it one of Dougal's oils that were so delicately done they were often taken for water-colours ? She turned it over, looked down on it ... a corner of Liberty Wood . . . the fairest, loveliest corner of all ... a glade in a shaft of sunlight, surrounded by darker pines and in the middle, lit by the sun, a silver birch that looked as young as Eden itself.

He knew by her silence that she found it charming. There was his signature in one corner and the title of the picture in the other: "Sweet are the Ways."

Her finger traced the lettering, she looked up. "Dougal, is it a quotation from a poem?"

His eyes held hers. "Not from a poem, from a German proverb. Want to hear the rest? It's 'Sweet are the ways I would have with thee.' "

His hand came to hers. He felt it tremble in his warm clasp. Her fingers were icy.

"Ways like this, Elspeth," and he took her gently into his arms, kissed her and kissed her again. He pulled her to her feet, keeping her hands within his.

"Elspeth, that was a magic moment. Magic for you too . . . no, no, darling, don't deny it. Surely I can say it without you resenting it? Because it's true. That was all that a kiss should be. It makes nonsense of any objections you have to marrying me. I'll take the risk. Feeling like this ... both of us . . . you can't possibly go on saying no."

Elspeth turned away and there was bitterness in her voice. For his sake, not hers, she had to be strong.

"I don't even trust moments like this, Dougal. After all, I've experienced magic moments before. Moments I *thought* were ideal. *But they don't last.* And in spite of ail Perry and I meant to each other once, *he* knew it was impossible, that it would affect his ministry. I love my picture, Dougal, I love it very much, but there will never be anything but friendship between you and me. Christmas is a dangerous time. Too much goodwill. Too much mistletoe. It will be a good thing when New Year is over and you take your holiday at the sea. And I'll be back in the Crooked House and into my year's work. It's all that interests me."

When she had gone to bed Dougal MacNab leafed through his Blue Book. Through the names and addresses of all New Zealand ministers. Perry? That would be short for Peregrine. But there was no one there with that Christian name. It needn't have been a Presbyterian. Perhaps Baptist or Methodist. She never said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT was a February day when Nigel Montrose came into Oamaru, that limestone city with its beautifully proportioned buildings sitting beside the opalescent sea. He decided he'd call on Rebecca, get news of Elspeth.

Rebecca was *glad* to see him. She'd always like Nigel, though she'd never felt he was right for Elspeth. They were both too analytical.

She said, *to* his questions, that from her letters Elspeth seemed to be enjoying the rural life immensely. "Are you calling on her, Nigel?"

"Yes. I've seen her since she left Canterbury, you know, but only in the *city*. We had tea together. But this time I'm going out there."

Rebecca said, "Nigel, is there any chance of you taking a passenger? Not me — Loris. She's really *off-colour*."

"Loris? Good gracious! What's wrong with her? She's always been so full of the joy of life."

"Exactly. I'm sure it's a lassitude of the spirit more than health. But she's lost weight. Loris is very open about things as a rule. But it makes me suspect a love-affair gone wrong. I've even thought perhaps she's fallen in love with one of the married doctors or something. You know girls can imagine such things. They don't last, but at that age they can suffer agonies . . . and laugh about them ten years later.

"They took her off night-duty, but she didn't pick up, and finally they've given her ten days off. She'll be coming off duty at one. She wasn't interested in going away. I offered to take her to Stewart Island or Fiordland, but she wasn't having any. But she and Elspeth

are like sisters and a week or more in Fair-acre Valley might be ideal for her."

"I'll take her. I'd love to."

"Will it hold you up? I could fling some things in a case for her now."

"No, it won't delay me. I'm not doing any business in Dunedin till tomorrow. I'll go up to the hospital and get her. The Main one?"

"No. She's been at a private one for some time. I'll tell you how to get there. The nurses' home is right above it. A drive comes down the side."

Loris came listlessly down the drive, a big bag of washing on her arm. What she was going to do with this time off she didn't know. She'd rather work, tiring herself out, so she could sleep. The sun was in her eyes . . . she put up a hand to shade them. Heavens, who was that? It looked for all the world like Nigel Montrose. It couldn't be. She was seeing things. You did, when a man's image was engraved on your heart. You saw him in every crowd, in every street.

She'd kept it under control all the years she'd thought he would marry Elspeth, but since Elspeth had cut loose the whole situation had tormented her. She thought she would never see him again. Before, with Elspeth, he had been a frequent visitor.

All of a sudden her vision dazzled, then cleared. It *was* Nigel. Waiting as she had always dreamed he might wait... lithe, well-groomed, a debonair air. But how, how? Why?

He took the heavy bag as he reached, said, "Loris, I hear you've got a spot of leave? How about coming down to Elspeth's with me? I

thought I'd run out and see her while I was junketing round Otago. I'm going as far as Queens- town and Wanaka. Wouldn't you love the Lakes at this time of the year?"

Loris's voice went all husky on her. "I'd love to," she managed. It would be only torturing herself further . . . she supposed that Nigel's idea was to see if, in Elspeth's case, absence had made the heart grow fonder, but she just couldn't refuse. It would be something to remember. More than she had ever had. Time alone with him.

Loris was glad she'd put on this pink candy-striped frock and her white shoes and gloves. And that she had shampooed her sleek brown hair this morning. It hung almost to her shoulders had turned up at the ends like hyacinth petals. She wouldn't see much of Nigel, of course, but if she had nothing else she would have this heavenly two-and-a-half- hour drive to remember, the prettiest section from Christchurch to Invercargill.

Nigel was a delightful companion. He said to her, with an appreciative glance, "It must be nearly twelve months since I've seen you. It *must* have been an important year to you emotionally, Loris. You've matured — quite delightfully."

"Must be the effect of coming of age. I've a feeling the years are going to fly now." She added carelessly, as if coming of age gave her the right, "How old are you, Nigel?" „

He grinned. "How old would you think?"

She pulled a face. "That's a dangerous question. But I'll answer it honestly. Thirty-one? Or two?"

"Thirty-three. Not far out. Does it seem pretty old to you?"

"No. A woman of thirty-three might, because women are more mature than men, aren't they? Then nursing makes one feel older."

"Yes, I imagine it would. In fact, in that, you've probably seen more of the seamy side of life than I have."

Loris liked that. It levelled out the years between them a little.

Nigel said, "At one stage I fancied a medical career myself. But Father died quite suddenly and my mother and sisters were depending on me to carry on his wholesale business. I've no regrets, I might not have made the grade. It's a tough course and I wasn't a top-grade student, but I still buy anything and everything written about surgery and so on."

So they began to talk shop as the miles rolled by. At Kartigi, that lovely stretch of the Pacific, with the rollers pounding almost to the road, he indulgently stopped the car and they went on to the beach among the rock-pools. Nigel decided he'd not felt so young for years. He'd been getting a bit stale on it. He'd enjoyed yarning about the hospital life too. No mock modesty about this youngster, something that could be intensely irritating. She was completely natural.

She 'had a slight look of Elspeth, but wasn't as self-sufficient. Different colouring, of course . . . slightly darker and with eyes like brownish-purple pansies instead of Elspeth's witch-green. He chuckled to himself. Elspeth could hardly throw him out this time when he'd brought Loris at Rebecca's request.

As they crested Three-Mile-Hill he said to Loris, "Know where her cottage is?"

"Only that it's behind the church. We ought to find it easily enough." They did.

They parked the car in the lane, came up the path and round the house. What a charming garden . . . flowers blooming exuberantly as if they knew this was the last month of summer and there might never be another season as fragrant, as sweet ...

The sound of laughing came from ahead of them and Elspeth's voice.

"Oh, Dougal, don't, don't! I'm so comfortable. I love reading in the crotch of this tree, but it takes an age to get the cushions right ... I'll come over after tea and see your new fowl-house."

A man's answering laugh. "You'll come now . . . I've sweated and toiled this whole Monday and I want someone to oh and ah over it. And you oh and ah more delightfully than any other woman I've ever known. Down you come, Elspeth!"

Sounds of resisting, giggles, insulting remarks that meant nothing being bandied back and forth .. . they rounded the corner to see a tall broad-shouldered man reaching up into an ancient pear-tree and tugging.

There was a lilt in Elspeth's voice that neither of them had ever heard before. "Dougal, stop it! You're a mean, horrible, beastly man! You ought to be called MacCrab, not MacNab . . . Ouch, you brute, you're bruising me! Look out, I'm falling!"

She landed fair and square on Dougal, knocking him off his balance and landed in a swirl of blue gingham skirts and lacy petticoat frills.

He sat up pushed her off and said laughing, "Woman, you're a ton weight. You winded me!"

"Chivalry," mourned Elspeth. "What a thing to say! Gone are the days!"

"No, they aren't!" said the Reverend Dougal MacNab, and he bent and kissed her as she lay on her back, panting and laughing.

She sat up immediately, pushed at his chest and said in a really shocked voice: "Dougal MacNab! Have you gone stark, staring mad? What if Mrs. Wilmeston were to appear on the scene?"

"Well, die must've been kissed some time or another . . . though it's a fearsome thought, I'll admit!"

At that moment the little side-gate behind them clicked.

Their reaction was ludicrous. They were both immediately immobile, not daring to turn their heads. Then slowly, and with dread, they managed it.

Loris didn't know what made her put a hand on Nigel's arm. It had been purely instinctive. Immediately withdrawing it, she hoped it hadn't smacked of sympathy.

Dougal and Elspeth scrambled to their feet, looking sheepish, then they burst out laughing.

Fortunately Nigel was adept at smoothing over a situation. Loris could only guess what he must be feeling.

"Aren't you having fun?" he said. "Village life has its points, evidently."

Elspeth's blush was dying down. "It would have had more than points had it been the local Mrs. Grundy. And for heaven's sake don't think it's always like this."

"Only because you usually manage to keep me at arms' length," said Dougal MacNab outrageously.

Loris stared. This minister was really something! Not like that stuffy Perry who hadn't deserved Elspeth. Not that Elspeth would ever look at another minister, she supposed. She had said so. And even if you loved Elspeth almost achingly, you had to admit she was stubborn. Mother said it was because Elspeth had always had to discipline herself. That it had become a habit. Still, you never knew. This Dougal MacNab didn't look the sort to tamely submit. He was most aggressively masculine. Loris pulled herself up . . . she was indulging in wishful thinking. After all, she had learned to discipline herself too.

Nigel said easily, "I was in at Oamaru and Loris was just starting ten days' leave. She's been off-colour and Rebecca thought country air might be the best. So you're stuck with two guests. I'd rather stay here than in town. Can do?"

Elspeth said cautiously, "I can if you don't need entertaining. I'm in the thick of a new book and it means hours at the typewriter. By the end of the month the fruit will all be ripe and I'll be flat to the boards making jam and preserving. By then all the village activities will be in full swing again too. As it is Institute and Sunday-school have already started."

They looked surprised. Dougal answered their look. "She intended being a recluse when she came here, but you can't be in a small place. She's in everything she can be in and teaches Sunday-school to boot."

The look of surprise lingered on Nigel's face. So the fellow was amazed that she'd teach Sunday-school, was he? Damn his impudence. He hoped Elspeth wouldn't notice. It had been hard enough to persuade her.

Dougal MacNab pulled himself together. What was Nigel Montrose saying?

He was laughing with Loris. "Always devastatingly candid, our Elspeth, isn't she? Doesn't look as if she's going to kill the fatted calf for us. Never mind, we're accommodating people. We'll settle for boiled eggs. We'll heap coals of fire upon your head and be the perfect guests. We'll be no trouble. Loris will come out with me on my rounds to see the countryside and you can carry on with your wretched book. I just hope you get so sick of it you'll beg us to take you with us." A thought struck him. "Though you'd have to come with us the last two or three days. I'm going round the Lakes and Loris has never seen them in high summer. We'll need a chaperon."

Elspeth laughed. "Wild horses wouldn't keep me away from the Lakes. Besides, I need to revisit there, checking on things for my book."

Elspeth was glad Nigel hadn't come till she'd got the cottage a little more furnished. Brass bedsteads were coming in again and Fergus MacKinnon had given two from his loft. Polished up, they looked really something, and she had put white Marcella quilts on them that were in . keeping with their austerity and looked right with the Victorian paper she'd put on the walls herself, all satin stripes and true lovers' knots and wreaths of rosebuds.

She'd put a frill of spotted muslin round a second-hand kidney-shaped dressing-table, found a mirror stand for it, an old-fashioned thing with roses painted on the frame. China candlesticks completed it. Loris was charmed.

"What a good idea to get rid of that super-elegant stuff at the flat and go in for simple, cottagey stuff like this. And a rag mat. How enchanting! I shall be able to wiggle my bare toes in it."

Elspeth looked up and caught Nigel's eye fixed on Loris. They were most indulgent. "Where'll I put my stuff, Elspeth?" he asked.

"In here, Nigel. This is not properly furnished yet. I've just started on this room." Fortunately it has a built-in wardrobe. All she had bought for it was a divan in cottage weave, with lockers underneath, a bedside table and a reading lamp. She made few apologies.

In spite of all, she enjoyed the visit. It was good to have someone for the night meal and early breakfast. She said goodbye to them without regret at eight-thirty each morning and got on with her typing. Strange that Rebecca had been worried about Loris. She was positively blooming. It must have been that she was tired out with night-nursing.

Dougal would have liked to make the Lake trip too, "But it's too soon after my holidays. Anyway there's Presbytery on Tuesday and two important meetings in Dunedin, and in any case, I wouldn't care to go away when old Mr. Moresby is so ill."

Elsbeth despised herself for feeling so disappointed. She was conscious of so many feelings that, for the first time in her life, she was afraid of herself, of the intensity of her feelings for Dougal, afraid of betraying herself. It made her more severe than she need be, though she did not display this when Loris and Nigel were about.

Dougal said to her one morning: "How do you take to playing Chaperon to those two?"

Those two? Then he had noticed what she was beginning to suspect.

She said hesitatingly, "It's not so much that, really. I mean — it's not like a young couple arranging to come here and taking an aunt with them when they stay away."

Dougal burst out laughing. "I didn't mean that, idiot . . . darling idiot. You and Loris could be sisters." His eyes went watchful. "I meant that once you and Nigel were in love with each other and now—"

He was fiercely interrupted. "I was *not* in love with Nigel. Ever! Nigel has always been free to fall in love with someone else. I — we — that is — we—"

"Go on. Finish it. Or are you afraid to?"

"Not afraid to. But it's hard to explain. I crashed badly over — over someone else. Nigel picked up the pieces. Not by causing me to fall in love. I didn't have much time for love, after that experience, Dougal. But he comforted many unhappy hours. Even bolstered up my pride, saved my face. He's a man of the world type but oh, so kind."

Dougal looked at her shrewdly. He didn't want to tell her he had overheard that conversation in the King Bluff Hal but he said: "So you tried to keep the . . . er . . . association on that level, but I suppose Nigel did get serious after all?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he did. He's a calculating beggar, you know. Though I admire him in some ways. You can't imagine him rushing headlong into marriage. He weighed up all the pros and cons and decided we'd suit each other. He's cautious ... an experimentalist. And I wasn't exactly a fledgling. I'd had some experience of men. But I new it wouldn't work. Even after all that has happened to me I'm still an idealist. And besides, I felt that Nigel had never been overwhelmingly in love ... he'd just dabbled on the edge . . . and some day he was bound to go in head first."

She had no idea what she was doing to Dougal. He was willing her words to register on his mind so he could take them out later to sift them.

He said gently, "So you made it plain to him and you don't really mind that he—" He stopped because he wasn't sure himself what the present situation was. He'd better not say: "That he seems to be falling for Loris."

Elspeth finished it for him. "I don't mind that he doesn't appear to be pining away for love of me."

Dougal left it at that.

That night in his study, feeling inexpressibly dreary because at that moment Elspeth was nearly two hundred miles away beside the cornflower waters of Lake Wakatipu, Dougal decided to work on because sleep was beyond him.

His mind went over and over the things Elspeth had said . . . Nigel had picked up the pieces . . . Elspeth hadn't much time for love now, yet confessed she was still an idealist. She'd called Nigel a man of the world ... an experimentalist. The word had a nasty flavour in Dougal's mind. Yet Elspeth often said things that could mean anything and were uttered innocently.

She'd said she wasn't exactly a fledgling. No good trying to convince himself that whatever had happened was unimportant, that she made too much of it . . . it had been turbulent enough to cause a broken engagement. Dougal forced his mind to accept the fact that this other minister had considered her a risk to his career.

His mind went back to the overheard conversation in the restaurant . . . "Filled in a few lonely hours but was never a grand passion . . . you taught me a lot, Nigel . . . I'd never have been able to have written as I have . . . without you . . ."

The big question was: was he big enough to take it? Never to resent it? Not to let it mar their happiness if he should be able to persuade Elspeth that he wanted her for his wife as she was, not as she thought a minister's wife should be?

He was certain that, ultimately, he would beat down her objections, overrule them all, but if he were going to do just that, he would have to be absolutely sure he would not fail her. That he must not ever let her feel that her folly of past years was spoiling, for him, their most precious moments.

Suddenly, vividly, Elspeth's face came up before him . . . the wide, candid brow, the green eyes that met yours so frankly and only turned away if embarrassed by your ardour, that funny little row of freckles across her nose, her laugh, tricky, low, infinitely dear . . . She didn't look like a girl who'd had dealings with anything clandestine. In short, to use an outdated phrase, she had a virginal air. But . . .

Dougal got up impatiently, thrusting his chair back. Work . . . that was the thing.

His eye fell on the huge pile of magazines. They ought to be sorted before he left for Presbytery. Parishioners brought them. Dougal made sure they were good contemporary reading.

He picked out some old ones, put them aside and tied up the rest. Then he idly picked up one of the discards, began to leaf through it. A poem caught his eye. He began to read, then got his eye on the name at the foot. His eyes widened. That was a pen-name Elspeth had used years ago. She'd given him a poem over that name the other week. He'd asked her if she'd had anything on a certain subject to illustrate a talk for his Bible Class. She'd laughed and said, "Only one of my own," then, in explanation, "I used that pen-name for some of my more fugitive stuff years ago." She'd meant wearing-your-heart-

on-your-sleeve sort of stuff. He wasn't to know that. No wonder she'd used one for this.

"I am afraid to journey on alone,
Yes, I who once so loved all lonely ways

Now fear the stillness of the mountain paths,
The silence of long, unaccompanied days.
For you have taught me all the sheer delight
Of timeless hours spent in a world of two,

When all of earth's glad beauty paled before
The matchless joy of moments shared with you.
And though I go for comfort to my hills,
Lost is their power to make my heart rejoice,

For every tree breathes of your presence still,
Each rock gives back the echo of your voice.'

Dougal MacNab gazed at the page till the printed words ceased to register on his sight. Not that that mattered, because one verse — the second verse — was burned into his brain.

'For you have taught me all the sheer delight
Of timeless hours spent in a world of two . . . '

No good thinking that a candid brow and fearless eyes added up to what you wanted it to add up to. Nobody reading that poem would think other than he was thinking now ... no use deluding yourself. Elspeth had a warm, sweet generous nature . . . perhaps she had been too generous.

Dougal's head stayed in his hands a long time. Jealousy had been one emotion he had been a stranger to, till now. But, he admitted it, no longer. He was deeply, agonisingly resentful of the man who had

taught Elspeth the matchless joy of a world of two. He'd wanted her to discover it, first, with himself.

Yet when he rose to his feet, almost exhausted, he knew one thing, he had won one battle. Whatever her past, he loved her. For ever.

The phone rang.

"McNab here."

"Mark Gainsborough speaking. I'm at the Moresbys'. I don't think old Bill will last till morning. The family didn't want me to disturb you at this hour, but I knew you wouldn't forgive me if I didn't call you."

Dougal got his hat and coat, slipped through to wake Uncle Timothy and tell him he'd probably be out all night. Mrs. Moresby had died twelve months ago. Old Bill hadn't liked it without her. His family had looked after him well, created jobs for him to make him feel still needed. But his mainspring had gone when his wife had gone ahead of him.

When you looked at a marriage like that you thought it must always have been perfect, but he could remember Julia Moresby saying once, with the twinkle that was never far from her eyes, "If there's one thing that makes me madder than another, it's to hear a widow or widower say: 'We never had a cross word.' Either I dinna believe them or I think: "Puir souls, what a life . . . dull as ditchwater.' I've told Bill many a time if he dares say such a thing when I'm gone I'll come back and haunt him."

The three of them came back on the Sunday night, tanned and relaxed. Elspeth felt happy because she need no longer feel an atom

of guilt over Nigel'. That night Loris slipped into Elspeth's bedroom. Elspeth had an idea of what was coming.

She grinned impishly from her pillows. "Right, Loris, spill it! Though I think you know the answer. You've got a clear field you know."

Loris's wide brown eyes blinked. "Elspeth! And here, I've rehearsed this darned speech of mine, all day, right from Invercargill up. Are you sure?"

Elspeth sat up, resisted a temptation to take Loris's hand (she mustn't make this appear serious) and said: "It's such a relief. Loris, you'd better know the situation briefly, or you'll always imagine there was more to it than there was. No feelings were involved. I was licking my wounds after Perry let me down. Nigel was tired of being a sought-after bachelor ... we dodged the matchmakers that way. We partnered each other to staff dinners and dances. Nigel fell in love with me, but I think he got to the stage of thinking his ideal woman would never appear in his life and he'd got used to having me round and thought we might do each other. A lot of nonsense." She stifled a yawn. "Look, Loris, I'm dead beat. I think it was a pity you had to have me with you on this trip. But I think Nigel is longing to have you to himself on Tuesday going back. That's why I've said I wanted to go up by train. I was sorry I said I had to go to Christchurch that day, at all, but I got out of it nicely. Nigel won't say anything to you, I'm sure, till he's quite clear of me."

Suddenly the light left Loris's face. "Are you sure he wants to?"

Elspeth looked at her witheringly. "Really, Loris, you need no answer to that. It's in his every look at you. But you'd hardly expect him to propose when a bit from his past — me — is lying untidily around."

Loris giggled. "The way you put things, Elspeth!"

Elspeth said shrewdly: "I think you'll have to give him the opening, Loris. He's come down with me for two or three years to your parents' place. And the fact that I'm your aunt — though only five years older — makes him feel a different generation. Oh, goodness," they both giggled, "that sounds ancient. I mean a slightly different age-group. So you'd better help him out. I mean, it may be more romantic to make the man the hunter, but in this case, no."

She went off to sleep happily.

Dougal proposed that they all go to a film on the Monday night. "I've been so busy I've felt cheated. It's years since I've been one of a foursome."

It was exactly the sort of film that Dougal liked best. The sort he'd want to see with Elspeth . . . witty . . . humorous . . . with a happy ending and some quite fine moments. He liked hearing her suppressed laughter, her indrawn breaths; he liked to meet her eyes, there in the intimate dimness, sharing a kindred appreciation.

As he and Elspeth got into the back of Nigel's sumptuous Chevrolet, he slid his arm round Elspeth. She turned to him, said in the faintest of whispers. "Dougal, take your arm away!"

"Oh, rubbish!" he retorted, several degrees above a whisper. "Don't be so old-maidish!" She dared not say another word.

Loris felt that Nigel had guessed even if, like her, he'd only caught half the words. Without thinking she put a hand on his knee. Instantly his came down to cover it Loris became lost in a happy dream. Pity all their trip up on Tuesday had to be daylight. There was something about a pulsing, February night like this . . . under southern stars, a full moon . . .

Back at the Crooked House they began to make supper, doing a huge stack of savoury toast. Dougal said, twinkling. "I've been here more at night, since you two arrived, than ever I've been. Elspeth's such a stickler for convention."

"No wonder," said Nigel thoughtlessly. "She won't want anyone talking about *you*. Not the minister of the flock."

Dougal looked at her.

No wonder Elspeth's a stickler for convention.

Because another minister had thought her too unconventional? Or what?

They'd finished their supper when suddenly Loris got up, moved to the window and said, "There's the moon . . . right above Candy Hill. Ever since I've been here I've wanted to climb it. Nigel, I know it's madly late, but I love doing ridiculous things . . . let's climb it, please?"

Elspeth offered up an instant prayer . . . don't let him refuse . . . don't let anything wipe that look off Loris's face . . . please . . . please?

Nigel rose instantly. "Why not? Why should we pull down blinds and go to bed just because the clock says so? Tonight may never come again — just like this. You'd better take a coat, Loris."

Elspeth managed to look over at Dougal and shake her head in case he'd rise and say what about them all doing it. He got the message.

Dougal sat on for a few moments in silence while Elspeth's despised fire settled into grey ash. Then he looked across at her.

"What's the strength of that?"

The green eyes lit with laughter. "Just that I think Nigel Montrose is in love — truly— for the first time in his hard-boiled life. He's a different person."

He said slowly: "And he was once in love with you. How are you going to feel about it?"

She crumpled up. "He tried so hard to be in love with me. He thought it would be so sensible! How will I feel about it? Well, I'll take it very well as long as he never calls me Auntie!"

She was sitting on a humpty, her green pleated skirts spread round her long legs. Dougal Strode across the floor, pulled her to her feet, smiled into her eyes and kissed her thoroughly. "That's my girl," he said.

The next moment she was holding him off, though she didn't look stormy. "I must remind you, reverend sir, that I am not your girl and that it's time you went home."

He said seriously, holding her hands still, though at a distance, "You'll sleep, won't you? You won't let this turn of events keep you awake, milling over the past?"

It was sweet of him. Elspeth felt tears sting her lids. She looked down quickly to hide them. "No, Dougal, I won't."

He put a finger under her chin, forced it up. "You're finding healing in Fair-acre Valley, aren't you, Elspeth . . . my Elspeth?"

"Yes . . . healing. But my ideas on certain subjects remain the same as ever. Therefore they're taboo for discussion."

He wisely decided not to press it. "I'm still giving you time. Time to make up your mind to tell me and to let me be the judge."

He saw her face whiten, so knew she wanted to weaken. "No ... I should never let my better judgment be set aside. I *know* it wouldn't work. I wouldn't risk it, for your sake and for the work's sake. Don't make it too hard for me. Dougal, I don't want to be up when those two come down from Candy Hill. I've a premonition they'll want to be alone. That they'll be glad, up there, to see my light go out. You must go."

Dougal knocked out his pipe, put it in his pocket, said, "They'll be away tomorrow night. Perhaps we could see Candy Hill by moonlight then?"

She shook her head. "I haven't had time to tell you. I'll be in Christchurch on business. I'm going up by the midday train."

Elsbeth said, just before She shut the back door behind him, "And next week they'll be no moon."

She came in, put the guard in front of the fire, went to bed, but didn't read. Perhaps it was just as well she was going to Christchurch ... she was in too softened a mood. It was dangerous ... for Dougal.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LORIS had an incandescent look the next morning. It made Elspeth catch her breath with delight. It was unmistakable. On the heels of the delight came a dreary thought: I could look like that too . . . for Dougal. If only so much water hadn't gone through the mill . . . she caught herself up on thought. She must enter into other people's feelings. Nigel came in. He looked ten years younger, eager, boyish.

Elspeth looked from one to the other. "Well?" Her eyes were sparkling.

Nigel said, not avoiding her eyes, "Loris told me she asked your permission first . . . Elspeth, you utter pet, you can give us your blessing."

Elspeth put an arm round each, said, "A fairy-tale ending ... it makes me very happy."

Nigel said, kissing her cheek, "It's been a magic ten days. I can't believe it. And, best of all, we predict a happy ending for you too ... oh, look at her, Loris, she's blushing."

Elspeth's colour subsided as quickly as it had risen. She thought rapidly. She dared not say to these two that she would never marry Dougal and why. They would — with the best of intentions -- try to put things right. And the decision must be hers, not Dougal's. She was glad when they were on their way.

Later, in the train, she was conscious of a great freedom. She knew she had been right in refusing' Nigel. He had really and truly fallen in love, something everyone ought to experience even if it didn't have a happy ending. It could still give meaning to life. Imagine if she had never known Dougal! Had never known how fine a man could be.

True, at twenty-one she had thought she had met her true love. For instance, think of all those heart-rendering poems she had written when they parted . . . good job she'd put them all under a pen-name that Perry could not recognise. They had got something out of her system. But with him she had just been in love with love . . . had imagined him a strong character, a chivalrous one. And he had failed her when she had needed him most.

Elsbeth loved train travel. It was soothing. And she was going back to Christchurch, the beloved city where she had been born.

She had a most stimulating time in Christchurch. She was beginning to arrive as a novelist, not just a columnist. An editor took her to lunch, she visited all the bookshops, called in at the shop, was given a rare welcome; old Alexander and his son-in-law, Michael Redmond, showed her all the improvements. She visited her Uncle Benjamin, thought his wife, Claire, looked frailer than ever, but then she always had. That was why Uncle Ben had given up the sea years sooner than he would have done.

Elsbeth enjoyed it to the hilt, right up to the night she was due to go home, when she was assailed by such homesickness for Fair-acre Valley that she almost took the rail- car that night instead of waiting for the morning express.

She was glad she'd made no arrangements for tonight. She'd have her evening meal at a restaurant then return to her modest bed-and-breakfast place till she got the express at eight-thirty-five.

She was starting her second course when she saw Pamela Wilmeston walk in, accompanied by a man a few years her senior. Poor Pamela, that mother of hers must have destroyed any confidence she'd ever had. It wasn't right for a girl her age to be quite so self-conscious. A burning blush spread over her whole face as she saw Elsbeth. In fact, the girl looked, positively guilty.

Probably she was with some man of whom her mother would not approve. Not that that would mean anything ! It would be hard to find a man Mrs. Wilmeston *would* approve. He'd only have to smoke, or like ballet, or be ecumenically-minded for her to think he was outside the pale and heading for perdition. One of these days that woman would drive her daughter away from home altogether.

Pamela must be on holiday. What a charming man he seemed. Elspeth didn't remember hearing Pamela was on vacation. You heard most things in Fair-acre. But of course Pam worked in Dunedin and was only home at weekends.

Elspeth became increasingly aware that Pamela was desperately ill at ease. It finally infected Elspeth. She began to feel uneasy herself. She even toyed with the idea of going across and asking Pamela if she was well. But that was foolish. She had someone with her. He would look after her.

Pamela was certainly not doing justice to the excellent meal. Her companion was most solicitous. Finally Elspeth decided to go, then on an impulse, instead of going to the cash-desk, went to the powder-room instead. She could not explain her curious reluctance to leave. It was purely instinctive. She went across to the mirror, renewed her makeup, slowly put the things back in her bag.

In came Pamela. She was ghastly pale.

That settled it. Elspeth said crisply: "Pamela, there's something wrong. What is it? Are you not well?"

Pamela sat on the couch and put her head in her hands.

Elspeth sat beside her, possessed herself of one of the girl's hands, said: "Pamela, I don't think it's sickness. It's something more. Will it

help you to tell me about it? Or even if you can't tell me, is there something I can do to help?"

It seemed a long time before Pamela began, but a loud crash from the restaurant kitchen seemed to waken her to a realisation that she could not leave her escort too long.

She said in a whisper, raising hunted eyes to Elspeth's, "I'm running away . . . with that man in there. He — I — we love each other, but:—"

Elspeth said slowly: "But he's a married man?"

Pamela's curtain of tawny hair fell across her eyes. "You — you'll be shocked. I—"

"I'm not shocked, Pam. Only sorry. It's almost impossible to be really happy under those conditions."

As there was no condemnation in her tones, Pamela peeped up. Elspeth's throat was dry with pity.

She managed to say: "What are your plans, Pamela? Where are you going?"

"To Australia eventually. It's — it's not just a cheap, passing affair, Elspeth. It's — the real thing — I think. We hope that — in time.— we may be able to get married."

Elspeth was praying for wisdom, for the right words, for a ray of inspiration. She said, slowly, "The trouble is that the wife may think it a passing affair . . . may think it worth while fighting to get her husband back. Most of us would. She may want the father of her children to be with them. She may sink her pride and ask him to come back, for their sake. She may not divorce him. What will happen to you then?"

Pamela said, her voice brittle, "I've thought of all that, and decided I'd risk it. I love him so. We've fought against this — both of us — so long. Only I'm so tired of nothing happening in my life."

Elspeth said, "I know. The little devil of loneliness drives us all hard, Pamela. And we try to compromise. Again, I know. I was tempted to take second-best not long ago. But there's an awful lot of life still ahead of you, Pam. It would be a pity to injure yourself at this stage. You can never quite go back to the old life — after that — you know."

Pamela shivered. Elspeth was thinking desperately. If she managed to take Pamela away, would the girl ever forgive her? Probably not, but would that matter?

She said, "Pamela, sometimes we rebel so bitterly against what we feel is the cruelty of fate. You've probably asked over and over again why this love should have grown in your heart when he isn't free. Yet I've always had the feeling that if a thing was meant to be, the way would be clear. That if God put fences round something, He meant them to be there and we were not meant to jump them. Perhaps he doesn't mean you to go that road. And that's why I'm here. Not that I look upon myself as an instrument of fate, but I'm a reminder of your earlier life. It will break your father's heart, you know."

She just dared not mention Pam's mother, since probably some of this could be laid at her door . . . those earlier, nice country boys she had discouraged.

Pamela looked up. "Elspeth, what *am* I going to do? Geoffrey is out there waiting ... but I don't think I can go through with it."

Elspeth's mind felt in a vice. What could they do? To go back and announce that it was all off . . . how ghastly. The man might make a scene. Even if he didn't how would a man feel under those

circumstances? He might have sufficient power over Pamela to sway her.

Suddenly Elspeth's mind cleared. There was only one thing to do. "Pam, I'm staying at the Brookenden. There happens to be a second way out of this restaurant. You do have to go back into the dining-room, but you can cut across a corner, and it's screened by potted trees. It leads into the other street, and there's almost always a taxi by the kerb. If not you must walk quickly along the Square and get one. Take it to the Brookenden and wait for me in my room. Number twenty-two. Here's my key. I'll see your — I'll see Geoffrey. What's his last name? Macadell. I'll be as nice to him as ever I can ... no denouncing or anything."

The child was trembling like an aspen. Elspeth said, "Have you enough money for the taxi?" Pamela nodded. "Then away we go . . . we'll both walk into the dining- room as if we were returning together, then you beat it for those back stairs and I'll nod to the *girl* at the cash-desk and say I'll pay later for you. Then I'll go across to Mr. Macadell."

The trouble was, of course, that Elspeth was sitting down at his table without having had a moment to marshal her thoughts.

She plunged. "Mr. Macadell, Pamela has gone to my hotel. She's going to spend the night with me. I'm from Fair-acre. She — she's changed her mind about going any further with you." Elspeth drew in a mighty breath. Well, she'd got that much put, though her pulses were still pounding.

For the first time she looked squarely at the man opposite her and felt incredibly sorry for him. A dull red crept up from his neck, but his cheeks were a curious mottled white and red. The veins stood out on them.

Elsbeth went on, "I'm terribly sorry about this ... I know these situations can get out of control and Pamela is a sweet kid with a rather too severe upbringing. Please don't think I'm censuring you . . . only that I was someone from home, and I think it broke her up when she saw me. I think Pamela isn't the sort to do this and not suffer horribly in the process."

Then she stopped because she felt sick and frightened and horribly embarrassed.

The man facing her suddenly smiled a little. "It's all right. I imagine this is the hardest thing you've ever done in your life. Oddly enough all the way from Dunedin I've been haunted by the idea that this really wasn't happening to me. My only excuse — if there can be an excuse — is that I genuinely love Pamela. Things for me haven't been good for so long, and she — well, I thought she was one of the nicest things that had ever happened to me. No, I won't go on. You don't want to hear the story of my life. But — look, would you have some coffee?"

Elsbeth didn't want any more coffee, but she said she would have it. She had an idea *he* needed it.

When it was brought she said, "I want you to know nothing of this will ever pass my lips. It's quite safe with me. I live alone. I'm used to keeping my own counsel. Nothing has been done that can't be undone, has it?"

He shook his head. "No. I was going to write to my — I was going to write home from here. Pam was going to write to her father. The only thing is that she has left her job. She told them she was taking a job in Christchurch."

Elsbeth said doubtfully, "They might take her back if she tells them the job here fell through — oh, wait, are you a traveller in hardware? I mean Pam was in that office, and you might have—"

"Yes, that was how we met. You mean—?"

"I mean it wouldn't be fair to either of you if you had to meet again. A clean break is better. Oh, do forgive me talking to you like this. It's such an intrusion on your privacy and yet I don't know what else to do."

"Go ahead. I've a feeling that when I've got over — got over missing Pamela, I'm going to be more grateful to you than to anyone else ever. It was just that suddenly I felt I couldn't bear the sort of life we've been leading any longer. Nothing but social climbing and a whirl of activities. But this isn't the solution."

"Then I think I can get Pamela a job here. I was with a firm — not in your line — and left it to live in the country. But my boss is still a close friend and wouldn't ask any more questions than he had to."

"Thank you. It would be the best thing." He stubbed out his cigarette, lit another, said, looking down on the smoke that spiralled from his fingers.

She raised her eyes to his and said, "And what about you? I mean what will you do — now? You — you won't do anything foolish, will you? I mean, you'll be at a loose end." She was annoyed to feel the tears prick her eyelids, her voice shake.

Geoffrey Macadell gave that wry smile again, but this time there was amusement in his eyes to match it. "I won't do anything foolish. The Avon's only about two feet deep! Do please put your mind at rest. I'll see a film, and go back to Dunedin when I've finished my calls here. If you can just look after Pamela tonight and get her that job, I'll be

forever in your debt. I'd be glad if you'll get back to her now and tell her that for her sake it may be all for the best. She's got all her life ahead of her."

Elsbeth felt as if she were taking part in a play. As if this wasn't really happening. They went down, he unlocked his car, took out Pamela's case and called her a taxi. As he held open the door for her, Elspeth stood very erect, held out her hand, said, "Goodbye . . . and the best of everything." She paused, then,, impelled, added: "God bless."

He gripped her hand hard, said. "Thank you. And goodbye."

Elsbeth felt weak in the knees as she got out of the taxi at her hotel. Suddenly she thought of Perry. Thought of him with a sense of glorious freedom. Had she been with Perry when this had happened he'd have insisted it was none of their business, that you only made matters worse by barging in, that it wasn't done. But she knew Dougal would have been with her all the way.

Pamela was sitting on the bed staring in front of her. Elspeth found her hands were ice-cold. She said, "Pam, I'm going to get you into a hot bath, then into bed, and bring you up a tray. Good thing there's another bed in this room. I'll get the sheets for them and make it up myself."

By the time Pamela had drunk the tea and managed two sandwiches she looked a little better and wanted to talk — once she had satisfied herself that Geoffrey had taken it as well as could be expected. Elspeth assured her no word would ever get back to Fair-acre from her.

Pamela said simply: "I know that. That's why you'll be so good as a minister's wife. You're so safe to tell things to. I felt that from the start."

She looked up and saw Elspeth's startled expression. "But you *will* marry Mr. MacNab, won't you? Everybody . . . almost everybody," she hastily amended, "wants you to."

Elspeth sat down on the edge of the bed, took Pamela's two hands in hers and said, "Pam, here's something I don't want spread abroad. I got myself mixed up in something quite unsavoury once. I was engaged to another minister and he couldn't stand it. So we parted. I'll never marry a minister. Least of all Dougal. You couldn't imagine him anything but a minister, could you? And I'd never put his career at the mercy of narrow-minded, tittle-tattling people. That's final."

All of a sudden gentle little Pamela looked quite stubborn. "I'd never, never believe you did anything underhand or shady. So there!"

Elspeth gave a wry smile. "It certainly wasn't underhand ... it was extremely public and in all the papers, and some day someone down there is going to talk about it. That's why I am Elspeth Cameron, author and spinster. And intend to remain so. Now, Pam, here are some aspirin. And I'm going to ring Mr. Hoodman. I'm going to ring the Manse too and tell Dougal I won't be coming home tomorrow. I'll say some business has cropped up. Now, cuddle down, honey, goodnight, and God bless." She bent down, kissed Pamela's cheek and was gone.

Dougal was delighted to hear her voice but disgruntled to know she wasn't coming home yet.

"This place has been like the Sahara without you, Elspeth."

She was shocked. "Dougal, you idiot! Remember it's a country exchange! I don't mean anyone would listen deliberately, but they might come back on the line to see if we're still connected."

"Well, that wouldn't worry me one iota," he assured her blandly. "After all, my life is an open book. I'm sure everyone must know I'm in love with you."

"Dougal!" she wailed, then realised that if he was in a mood like that she was fighting a losing battle and the only thing was to change the subject. "Anyway, I mustn't keep talking — this is costing me money. I don't know just when I'll be back, but I'll let you know."

She stayed longer than the time necessary to get Pamela settled. Her Aunt Claire died quite suddenly in her sleep. It was such a blessing after all Uncle Ben's patient years of devotion and of pain bravely borne that Elspeth couldn't feel too wretched over it.

Staying another week gave her time to make sure Pamela was on the road to rehabilitation. She'd said to Michael Redmond, his father-in-law's staff supervisor, that Pamela had had an emotional disturbance in her life and needed to be away from a certain undesirable attachment down south and wondered if he might know of any nice family who would be prepared to board her.

Michael had grinned. "I sure do. *We'll* board her. We're awfully nice!"

"But Angela's got too much to do — two children."

"Exactly. We could do with someone to help. She could baby-sit for instance and take the baby for walks. Don't raise objections, Elspeth, we're so much in your debt we'd like to."

Her colour rose. "Oh, Mike! That's a long way behind us. Time it was forgotten."

He looked sober. "It wasn't just a case of helping at a desperate moment, Elspeth. It almost wrecked your own life, didn't it?"

"It did *not*. It saved me from getting tied for life to someone who'd have let me down later. It was a marvellous escape!"

Michael stared. "You honestly think that?"

"I don't *think*. I *know*."

He peered. "I've always worried about you — thought it had gone deep. Sometimes I've felt guilty that things came so right for me ... a job like this, Angela, a father- in-law like Alexander Hoodman . . . everything. But you — you never fell in love again." He blinked, added, "I say, you *are* in love again! You're blushing!"

Elspeth didn't want any cloud, ever, on Michael Redmond's happiness. Not even the feather of a cloud. Besides, it was true ...

"I *am* in love again," she said, and blushed again to order.

Michael was delighted. So much so she had to ask him not to say anything to anyone yet. Then she said: "And Mike, don't ever feel you've got too much. Nothing can ever give you a happy childhood to remember. You deserve everything that's coming to you."

Dougal didn't need to meet her when she returned. She and Uncle Ben arrived in his car, a trailer behind them packed with things. A furniture van had preceded them, full of lovely treasures that would turn the Crooked House into the sort of home Elspeth had dreamed of when first she saw it before any blow of circumstance had fallen.

Everybody approved of Uncle Ben coming to live with Elspeth. Even Mrs. Wilmeston, according to Georgiana, was heard to say: "It's more *like* things. I do *not* approve of single women of Miss Cameron's age living alone. *Especially* next to the Manse." Georgiana added: "And did you hear about her visit to the Manse while you were away?"

"Not yet, Georgiana, though Dougal did say he had something funny to tell me when we were on our own — either the kids or the uncles have been about ever since I got home."

"Well, you know Robbie had a slight bout of German measles while you were away? When he was better but still not allowed back at school, he went on the back veranda putting some straw in a box for a broody hen. Mrs. Wilmeston arrived. She said to him: "Aren't you making a horrible mess with that straw, Robert? What are you supposed to be doing?"

"To which Robbie replied, 'Getting a nest ready for my broody hen.' Old Grundy said: 'But this is no time of year to be setting eggs. You ought to put that hen under a box for three days. That would cure her.'

"Mrs. Donovan and Dougal had heard voices and were advancing towards the door, so they heard all this. *And* Robbie's answer. I can imagine he'd be quite serious and polite with it. He said: 'That would be a wicked thing to do . . . how would you like to be broody and want to sit on eggs and be put under a box and never never get any chickens? You'd be real frustrated!'"

Uncle Ben and Uncle Timothy took to each other at once. They could not have been more different, the white-haired, scholarly old man and Uncle Ben with his seamed, tanned face with eyes as vividly blue as Dougal's, short, humorous, steadfast. But they were both fishermen, loved books, were both keen stamp collectors and loved chess.

Uncle Ben was a goer. He'd been a ship's carpenter, and things began to happen almost immediately at the Crooked House. Elspeth let him do it. It would take his mind off his loss. After all he had done so long for Aunt Claire he needed something to do.

In less than a month he had the stable ready for turning into a fine reception room such as Elspeth had dreamed of and had extended the top storey to be made into two rooms, one a spare bedroom and the other a workshop where, when he'd got the Crooked House Ship-shape, he could do his carving.

Robbie was his shadow and in less than a week had picked up so many nautical terms Elspeth vowed it was like living on board a ship and she was always surprised to find herself looking out of a window and not a porthole. Uncle Ben was a staunch Presbyterian of the old school and liked to discuss the evening sermon to the full over a pipe on Sunday nights.

Elspeth was on her own the day Mrs. Wilmeston came to see her. The two Uncles were on the trail of some secondhand lattice windows they vowed would be ideal for the glassless dormers of the one-time stable.

Mrs. Wilmeston wasted no words. Elspeth was on her knees, weeding her onion patch.

"Miss Cameron! Were you responsible for Pamela taking this position in Christchurch?"

Elspeth felt a little sick. She didn't want any probing— for Pam's sake. She got up, dusted her hands, came on to the lawn and said, "Why, yes. At least I recommended her to Mr. Hoodman when she wanted a job in Christchurch. And to his son-in-law, the staff supervisor, though you'd know that, since Pam is boarding with them."

There was sheer dislike in the dark beady eyes set in the fat cheeks.

"What a pair you are . . . you and that minister cousin of yours! *He* was responsible for Pamela getting that job in Dunedin, leaving home and just being here at weekends. Now *you've* taken her still further away."

Elsbeth swallowed. "Mrs. Wilmeston, lots of girls leave home to work. Especially from the country where there are so few openings for them. Pamela is doing very well, they're immensely pleased with her. They've discovered she has a real flair for window-dressing as well as an ability for doing showcards. I suppose she's told you Mr. Hoodman is paying for her to take lessons in commercial art?"

Elsbeth did not add that Michael Redmond had written down to say that the junior window-dresser was taking a great interest in Pamela also . . . but not a business interest.

Mrs. Wilmeston said bitterly: "Fancy! A daughter of mine . . . she'll probably finish up by marrying a counter-jumper!"

Elsbeth blinked, "Counter-jumper? What—oh, I know. That's an old-fashioned name for a shop-assistant. Well, what's wrong with that?"

"I wanted her to marry a professional man. You've done nothing but meddle ever since you came to Fair-acre . . . you and your Village Beautifying Association! This place was better without you."

Elsbeth drew herself up, "I think you're being impertinent, Mrs. Wilmeston. *And* ridiculous."

This time Mrs. Wilmeston blinked. That was the sort of thing she usually said herself. She'd never had it said to her before."

Mrs. Wilmeston said: "Dear me, you do get heated, don't you? I'll be going. I didn't come here to bandy words with you."

"You did, you know. You came here to have a piece of me because I helped Pamela get that job. After all, some girls these days go off to England and take positions there.

Apron-strings are out of fashion. It's not as if you needed Pamela at home as my mother did — because she was crippled."

Mrs. Wilmeston stalked out. She met Dougal at the gate coming in with a wheelbarrow load of manure for Elspeth. To his courteous greeting she said: "It was a bad day for Fair-acre when you let that cousin of your's buy Martha Moore's house!"

She marched straight on before he could reply.

Dougal trundled the barrow in, said, "Where'd you like this, Elspeth?" Then, "What's got Mrs. Wilmeston's goat this time, poor soul?"

Elspeth, who had forsaken the onion-weeding for the mare getting-it-out-of-your-system job of digging furiously, said, "Spread it right here, Dougal. It's quite a story. She's certainly one of the Lord's awkward squad."

When she'd dug a few more pits she said, "She blamed you for Pamela going to Dunedin. Did you, too, speak for Pam to some employer?"

Dougal, throwing manure off with a fork, said, "No, poor Pam. Her mother hopelessly embarrassed her. "He chuckled. "The profession she wanted Pam to marry into was the ministry. By way of me! Can you think of anything more humiliating for any daughter? Invitations came thick and fast when first I came here. It's always happening when there's a single man let loose on a parish. Nothing to do with one's own personality . . . simply and solely the fascination of the cloth—to some." He threw her a wicked glance. "You, of course,

wouldn't understand that. Pam got so sick of it she hived off to Dunedin and told her mother why. She didn't even come back for weekends for long enough. Then one day I bumped into her in town, took her off for a cup of tea—and we had a yarn about it. I told her I knew she didn't fancy me but couldn't we see the funny side of it? That there had been match-making mammas ever since cave-man days probably. We've been good pals since. Here, for goodness sake give me that spade—that's no job for a woman. And if you had any decent feelings at all you'd rescue me from situations like that and marry me."

Elspeth disregarded that and said, "Oddly enough, though I gather Mrs. Wilmeston hasn't the ghost of a notion yet that there's a romance in the air, Mike Redmond told me in a letter recently that this junior window-dresser is a local preacher and next year is going to enter Varsity preparatory to becoming a divinity student."

"Good heavens! Mrs. Wilmeston will be thanking you with tears in her eyes yet. How come you got the job for Pam anyway?"

Elspeth said vaguely, "Oh, I knew she wanted to get away from Dunedin, that's all. Dougal, do I water this thoroughly now it's spread?"

The whole village was entranced with the transformation Uncle Ben had made at the Crooked House. Elspeth got busy on that part of the garden as soon as he had finished. It wasn't large and it wasn't like starting from scratch. The seedling hollyhocks had only needed staking, larkspur sprang up thickly, rambler roses, long unpruned, bloomed as they had never bloomed before, and cornflowers and grannybonnets filled in the spaces.

Uncle Tim and Uncle Ben whitewashed the walls, painted the sills the Cotswold green Elspeth had dreamed about, but wouldn't allow her to have her lipstick-red door. They said it must be a stable type,

halved, with oiled wood and black wrought-iron hinges.. They got a copper lamp to hang above it, and a new but old-fashioned looking white picket fence completed it.

Dougal chuckled. "They've got the bit between their teeth, haven't they? But don't let them overrule all your ideas, Elspeth."

She laughed. "They've loved it so much I've not had the heart to stop them. Good job Uncle Ben brought all his books toe and that I kept Dad's. They're putting bookshelves round three walls of the downstairs room—low ones—and have graciously permitted me to put ornaments on the top. Have you noticed Robbie's well on the way to becoming an expert with hammer and saw too? They think he's pretty good. He must get it from you."

Dougal nodded. "It's most heart-warming to see those two old fellows together. And as for the way you've brought Jo-anne out of her shell — I can't ever thank you enough."

"I needed Jo-anne as much as she needed me." Her green eyes were very serious.

Dougal caught her hand as it hung by her side. "Have you no other needs, Elspeth?"

Her eyes swept up to his, fell before their blue ardency. "I've made myself content with what I've got, Dougal. Content with a cottage in the country, a career, companionship ... oh, dear, I'm getting as alliterative as Reuben!"

He shook his head at her. "No false herrings. I'm still biding my time. But I will not always."

CHAPTER NINE

IT was a Monday in Dunedin. Autumn had come suddenly to that peerless city of dreaming spires and grey university buildings and blue harbour. English trees lit gold and russet torches among the native evergreens. Where spring had splashed scarlet tulips below the Robbie Burns statue in the Octagon, now wallflowers in rich golds and browns patched the lawns, forget-me-nots between' them. Chrysanthemums were budding in all the city gardens.

Wallace Perrington walked along Princes Street and thought of its namesake in Edinburgh. But he was glad to be back, even if, at the moment, he was at a loose end. He'd thought to find things much the same and hadn't. Most of the men of his year were now married, with families, and were not half as interested in him as they once had been. He felt, despite the enriching experiences of his travel, that life for him had stood still and had rushed on happily and interestingly for them.

He didn't know any Dunedin ministers well enough to drop into their manses, talk casually, and try to find out without stressing his vital interest if they knew if one Elspeth Cameron was in membership with them. She might be no longer a Presbyterian, of course. Come to that, she mightn't even be a churchgoer anymore. She'd been pretty bitter about such things at the time. Though Elspeth was so fundamentally sound it probably hadn't lasted. Sound and wholesome and ... he hoped . . . forgiving.

It would be so humiliating if he had to write her care of her publishers in England to get word to her that he wanted to see her again. He'd gone to Hoodman's, not really relishing meeting Alexander again, but making himself do it. He'd managed to avoid meeting Mike Redmond.

Alexander Hoodman had been very blunt. Wallace had had the feeling the old man had enjoyed frustrating him.

"Yes, I've got her address—she's been away from here some time—but I'm not giving it to you. She's better without you disturbing her life again. She has found happiness and success."

He knew about the success. It had given him a queer feeling to see her name on the bookstalls in Britain. He bought the two books and read them. He'd been so relieved to find no trace of cynicism in them. There had been so much of that old Elspeth in them, vital, idealistic, full of fun. That was what had brought him back.

He'd got off the express at Oamaru, to see Rebecca. He'd had no luck. Might as well have tried to open an oyster-shell with a matchstick. She'd said calmly, "Oh, Elspeth wouldn't want to see you, Perry. She leads a very full and satisfying life these days."

He had suggested he might leave a note for Rebecca to send on and said Elspeth herself could then have decided whether or not she wanted to see him.

Rebecca had said an uncompromising no. He'd stayed a while, hoping she might let drop some hint of Elspeth's whereabouts. When that failed he thought of Nigel Montrose. If he knew where she lived, then perhaps Nigel would tell him. He could sink his pride that far.

"Ever see anything of Nigel Montrose these days?" he asked.

Rebecca-laughed mischievously, reminding him intolerably of the quality of Elspeth's laughter. "Do we see anything of him? He practically lives here. My dear Perry, he's about to become my son-in-law!"

Perry had stared. "Son-in-law?" You mean brother-in-law!" Well, he'd left it too late. It had taken Elspeth a long time to get round to it, but she was going to marry Nigel. It was his own fault, a bitter thought. Nigel would never have needed to comfort her, or had the opportunity, but for him. What—his racing thoughts halted. What was Rebecca saying?

She repeated it. "I mean *son*-in-law. He's going to marry Loris next Labour weekend. Loris is twenty. Elspeth never saw in Nigel more than a friend."

Rebecca had then intimated that she had nothing further to say. That night at Queen's there had been a hosiery traveller staying. Wallace Perrington had led the talk round to commercial travellers, had mentioned he'd known one Nigel Montrose years ago in Christchurch.

"How odd ... I hadn't seen him for a couple of years, but met him fairly recently. I always thought of him as a confirmed bachelor, but he had the sweetest young thing in tow. They'd just got engaged. In fact, they'd just bought the ring. They were coming out of a Dunedin jeweller's. They had been down staying with her aunt."

"What was the aunt's name?" asked Wallace quickly.

The traveller had looked faintly surprised. "I've no idea. She didn't really come into it. It was just mentioned in passing."

Wallace Perrington had let it go. He'd ascertained that Nigel still lived in Christchurch, so if he failed to find Elspeth in Dunedin he could return and look him up in the telephone book. He wondered if he would be as cagey as Rebecca and old Hoodman.

Inspiration struck him. He would call in at Whitcombe's book store. Elspeth was almost certain to run an account with them and, in any

case, would often be in finding out how her books were selling. They'd be bound to know where she lived. He retraced his steps. A photographer's window- case caught his eye. He paused. Photos here of graduates, some Divinity students among them. The other side of the showcase was devoted to candid camera shots. Then his eye fell on it . . .

An extremely large minister, fair, with shoulders to match his height. There was a woman with him and a child between them swinging on their hands. The woman was tall too, and held herself well, and she was laughing at the man. A strand of hair was blowing across her face. She looked happy, vital ... she looked extremely material. Elspeth!

Wallace was conscious of shock. It was ridiculous. Why shouldn't she be married? Though it wasn't just that — it was the *age* of the child. She looked as if she couldn't be much under four. But that couldn't be. She must be a very large three. Of course this minister — whoever he was — well over six feet, so naturally he'd have a tall daughter. The little girl was very like him. But even if she was three, Elspeth must have been married soon after he left New Zealand. She certainly hadn't nursed a broken heart.

The Reverend Wallace Perrington drew in a deep breath, let it go. What a fool he had been all those years ago, what an incredibly patronising, insufferable young fool. It served him right. What a wife Elspeth would make!

He thrust that thought away. He was quite honestly ashamed of it. He'd not come out of this broken engagement too well. A few people whose opinion he had valued had shown him that. Perhaps it hadn't been altogether his own fault. He'd been brought up by a very materially-minded mother whose one thought had been to further his career. She had never approved of Elspeth ... her impetuosity, her

mania for helping lame dogs over stiles, the generosity that, as his mother had said, Elspeth carried to a fault.

Altogether Wallace Perrington was feeling very chastened. No point in going on to Whitcombe's now. He'd go into the Bluff King Hal and have some coffee.

He was waiting for his order when his attention was attracted by a group at one of the large tables. They looked like students ... not the duffle-coated, blue-and-gold scarfed varsity students you saw all over Dunedin, but Divs. They all had darkish suits on, but no ministerial collars. They'd probably come up in a bunch from their preaching appointments down south.

But there was one dog-collar he saw as the waitress moved off with their order. It belonged to a big fair man with rugged features. A farmer type in holy orders . . . and there was a girl with him.

A girl with hair that was neither fair nor brown and waved a little at the temples. Who had a serene brow and high cheekbones and an impish look . . . who, he knew from memory, had eyes of green with tawny specks in them and a row of freckles over her nose. A girl whose only real claim to beauty was a smallish mouth, perfectly curved. She sat at the end of the table, enjoying the banter, her gaze flying from one to the other, her hands in the pockets of her green Harris tweed suit, sitting back rather negligently, her long, lovely legs crossed.

Elspeth.

Wallace Perrington got up as if propelled, and went across. He knew a chap at the far end. He'd been a first year varsity student boarding at Knox College when he himself had been a final year Div. That was good enough.

He leaned over him, said, "Hullo, Parkinson . . . remember me?"

Parkinson did. "Well, for goodness' sake! Sure I do. Hyde Massey was asking after you just the other day. He wondered if you'd got back yet. Chaps, this is one Wallace Perrington, who's just got back from Edinburgh Where's he's been getting himself a Ph.D." Parkinson ran through the names of the students, then said, "And Dougal MacNab, minister of the Fair-acre Parish — oh, gosh, I'm sorry, Elspeth. I ought to have introduced you first. This is—"

"No need to introduce us," said Elspeth smoothly. "We've met before. How do you do?"

She managed it so naturally that nothing in her voice caused Dougal to think it other than a casual meeting. Wallace Perrington waved his waitress across with his coffee and managed to drop down in a seat at the far side of Elspeth.

Talk became general, as it always does. Dougal was listening to Bill MacIntyre telling him of the nasty experience he'd had in a small pulpit that had two steps leading down from it. He'd bounced round too much, suddenly found himself stepping backwards into space and only saved himself from utter disaster by clutching frantically at the pulpit rail. He'd had to finish his sermon more speedily than he'd wanted to because he knew most of his congregation were struggling with the giggles.

Under cover of the laughter the Reverend Wallace Perrington said to Elspeth, "No wonder I couldn't find you in the telephone book."

Elspeth looked uncaring but said, quite misunderstanding him, "Oh, of course you'd be looking in the Dunedin directory. Fair-acre has an exchange of its own. It's a toll-charge from Dunedin."

He said: "I preached out there once or twice in my student days. It's very pretty. Always reminded me of Tai Tapu — remember once how we thought we'd like to parish in that area?"

Elspeth said quickly because she didn't want Dougal to hear, "Oh, did we? I'd forgotten. But Fair-acre is the most beautiful place in the world." She laughed. "That's an extravagant statement from one who's never been further than Australia, but you'll remember I was always given to extravagancies in speech. It used to embarrass you."

She went on, "You'd know the Manse there, then?"

"Yes, I stayed a weekend once in spring."

Elspeth said softly: "In spring. I came there first in spring. It was like a fairy-tale . . . acres of blossom, sheets of daffodils, and the Faraway Mountains with their toes almost in our garden." (She meant hers and Uncle Ben's, but Wallace wasn't to know that.) She went on: "I feel I've only lived since I came to Fair-acre."

Since she married this fellow MacNab, of course. Well, she needn't rub it in, even if he deserved it. This minister hadn't cared a hang about that old scandal, evidently. In fact, he'd not even given it time to settle down, it seemed. Perry was amazed at the tumult of his own feelings now he'd met Elspeth again. Her voice had always done things to him.

The waitress arrived, put the coffee in front of Elspeth. She began to pour. Wallace could see she was popular with this crowd. He was on her right.

As she handed out the last cup of coffee his eyes widened. Her left hand was ringless.

He put his own cup down with a clatter, and said, the words jerked out of him, "You aren't wearing a wedding- ring! Why?"

Elspeth got such a shock she involuntarily glanced at her hand.

"Why aren't I wearing a wedding-ring? For the simple reason I'm not married. What do you mean?"

Out of the tail of her eye she saw that either Dougal had finished his conversation with Bill or that he'd lost the thread of it, in what had caught his ear.

Wallace said: "I thought you were married to this fellow MacNab and living at the Fair-acre Manse. You said—"

"I didn't say I was living at the Manse, Perry. I don't even know where you got the idea. I live next door. Uncle Ben lives with me. I bought a cottage in the Valley last spring. I wanted to devote all my time to writing."

Dougal had caught on. *Perry*. The minister who had let Elspeth down. No wonder he'd not been able to find any minister with Peregrine as a Christian name in the Blue Book.

Dougal was so still it made Elspeth nervous. She wouldn't look at him. She tried to sound perfectly ordinary as she answered Perry.

"I can quite see how it must have sounded . . . trust me!"

Perry said, to her acute discomfort, "That's a mighty relief."

Dougal chuckled and took Perry's hand. "There isn't a Mrs. MacNab. I'm like yourself, Perrington, a bachelor."

Wallace Perrington decided he must get it sorted out. "Oddly enough, I saw your photos in that candid camera place a few doors down. You

each had the hand of a little girl." He looked directly at Dougal. "As the child was the image of you I thought she was your daughter."

"My niece. She and my nephew, Robbie, live with me. They're orphans. Elspeth helps me a lot, though I have an excellent housekeeper."

Perry breathed a little more easily. That would be like Elspeth.

Elspeth helped create this image by adding, "They look on me as a sort of aunt, as Dougal and I are related."

Perry picked up his roll and bit into it. Better and better.

Dougal's eyes began to twinkle.

Perry said, "Oh, I see. I'd no idea you had any relation a minister."

Dougal's eyes were dancing now. Oh, horrors, thought Elspeth, and when Dougal's in a mood like that you can't keep him in check.

He said meaningly, "I'm afraid the lady exaggerates the position, Perrington. We're not related, only connected by marriage. Praise the powers that be! We have a mutual cousin . . . one Meg Kirkwood. You may have met her. If you're deeply interested in such things, Meg is the daughter of a cousin of Elspeth's father and my father and Meg's mother were cousins."

The conversation grew general again, Elspeth joining in and managing with great adroitness to keep it that way.

Finally Perry cut through the fabric of the conversation, "Let's get out of here and go for a walk. I'll give you lunch later."

Elspeth said promptly, "I can't. I've got a hedgehog to feed."

Perry looked at her suspiciously.

She said guilelessly, "It's true. Robbie, Dougal's nephew, found it in the middle of the road yesterday."

"Then when can I see you, for see you I must?"

Elspeth said, "Ring me some time and we'll have a chat."

"Don't be so utterly ridiculous. I'll come and camp on your doorstep."

Elspeth thought: Thank goodness the others are deep in talk. She leaned forward a little in the hope Dougal would not hear. It was no good. That man must have hearing like a jungle beast. He leaned across and said, "No reason why he shouldn't come out with us now, Elspeth. You've got to make me lunch. Mrs. Donovan will have hers all cleared away by the time we get out there. She and Jo-anne are going to Georgiana's. Remember? They're phone-minding while Georgie helps with the swimming instruction for the tinies this afternoon."

Elspeth gave in. What was Dougal up to?

When they were outside Dougal said, "We've got the car parked in Gardner Motors in Moray Place." His hand slipped down his side, caught the tips of Elspeth's fingers and squeezed them. Elspeth instantly felt revitalised. As if he'd said: "Keep your pecker up."

Elspeth was glad Perry had not come back in those first few penurious weeks she had spent at Fair-acre. She was genuinely pleased to hear the gasp of delighted surprise he gave as Dougal stopped his new Vauxhall in Manse Lane.

The stable end now looked part and parcel of the whole, since the clematis had spread over it all. Its dazzling white and green walls were close to the picket fence, the lattice- windows sparkled, the

brick paths, relics of a bygone age, were in herringbone pattern and mossy. Alyssum frothed in lilac and white between every shrub. The clematis was a late- flowering one in pale lilac. Between the door and a window a pink English briar clung to a piece of green cyclone plastic netting; spindle-berries and cotoneasters were glowing magenta and red, the maples and sycamores were glorious to behold. Michaelmas daisies were the haunt of bees, ribbon- woods held clusters of delicate blossom that made you feel you took a step back into spring. Elspeth thought it was almost wrong to love a house so much.

She led the way in through the stable door. Uncle Ben and Uncle Timothy had sanded the floor till the timber was as smooth as glass and it was beautifully waxed because, conscious of the work they had put into it, Ben had bought an electric polisher. There were bright scatter rugs and big loose-covered armchairs and sofas, much of it from Ben's Christchurch home. The staircase that had replaced the loft ladder ran up from it, an elegant thing in white wrought- iron that had cost her uncle a mint of money. Books were everywhere.

They went into the other part of the house. Elspeth's parlour was dainty and small. They used it as a dining- room. Perry crossed to look at the picture over the fireplace, discovered the artist was one D. MacNab and didn't comment on its beauty.

The small-paned white-painted windows held such views . . . glimpses of Candy Hill, the little stream that ran singing from it, the orchard, the kitchen garden, the church steeple ... He looked round — that Dougal MacNab had girded himself in a white apron of Elspeth's and was busy whisking eggs for an omelet!

The kitchen, too, could hardly be recognised. Uncle Ben had installed the most modern of electric cookers, put in a fireplace of beautiful Lake Wakatipu stone, grey, lilac, green, puce . . . some had specks of

mica in it, reflecting the light. Through an alcove was Elspeth's small study.

The conversation was all on the surface.

When the last dish had been dried and put away Perry suddenly said, with, an air of confidence, "Look, MacNab, you probably don't know, but Elspeth and I were once engaged. We had a misunderstanding and broke it off. I've travelled over twelve thousand miles to see her and I'd like it to be alone. Need I say more?"

. Dougal propped himself on the kitchen table, said, "You needn't have said as much, really. Elspeth told me all that the first time I — but no, that's not right — it was the second time I proposed to her!"

Elspeth saw the devilment in his eyes, But this time had no wish to rebuke him. She looked demure, considering it and came up with: "I'm sure it wasn't the second time. I don't think I confided it to you till the third time, did I?"

"Make it the fifth time," suggested Perry, grinning also, though it was quite an achievement. "I get you, MacNab, but as the lady has apparently *not* said yes, and you've got the advantage by being on the spot, how about giving me a clear field this afternoon?"

Elspeth said dryly, "Quite frankly and nicely spoken, Perry, but it won't make an atom of difference. We *didn't* have a misunderstanding. I understood you all too well. And apart from that, the same obstacle is still in the way."

Dougal held his breath. Was it coming out?

No.

Perry said impatiently, "We can't talk here. I think you're afraid to be on your own with me."

Elspeth's chin came up. "Then I'd certainly like to rid you of that idea." She turned to look at Dougal in a most beseeching manner. "Dougal?" He thought she'd never said his name so nicely.

Dougal smiled down on her. "Okay. It's just how you want it, Elspeth."

Perry said, "And we won't stay here, either. We could get interrupted any moment. I'll hire a car at the village garage."

Elspeth said, "There are no cars for hire here. Almost everyone has transport. Uncle Ben is away with ours, of course."

She was conscious of surprise when Dougal said nonchalantly: "Take mine, Perrington. Here are the keys."

He walked quickly out of the door, so confident that it did things to Elspeth. A fair fight and no advantage taken. But she wouldn't marry either of them.

They ran right along the foot of the Maungatuas, not Faraway Mountains at this range, but Near-at-Hand, till they came to the turn-off leading to the Waipori Gorge, where high up in the hills, below Lake Mahinerangi, lay the power-station.

It ought to have been magic. They could not talk of serious matters because this road was narrow, dangerous, enchanting, and Perry had to watch his driving.

It was hot and Elspeth was glad she had shed her town suit for a green linen sheath frock, sleeveless and piped with white. She looked up, said "Sh!" as a taffeta swish of feathers sounded above them and

a pair of colourful native pigeons alighted in the trees and peered down on them, curious and unafraid.

There was no one save themselves at Mahinerangi. It was the perfect setting for a reconciliation. They sat on the turf and talked.

But there was nothing left in Elspeth's heart for him. Dougal had it all, even if there was no future in that either. She realised Perry was a finer, less selfish man than he had been; that she had entirely forgiven him. But she had no ambition to pick up the threads again; he simply didn't matter.

She said at last, very gently, "Perry, I think I always knew that we were not really suited. We were drawn together by things that made us seem kindred. Our love of books and poetry, our interest in the church, that fact that we both liked walking and swimming and didn't care much for organised sport. But fundamentally you were too orthodox for me. You didn't like the unusual, the unconventional. I wouldn't have made you happy even if — *that* — hadn't happened. I've got a most unfortunate flair for adventure. Things just happen to me. It's like being accident-prone.

"It would kill me to walk circumspectly all my days and I'd wither away in an atmosphere of disapproval. I could never always look before I leapt, I couldn't bear not to be free to act in scorn of consequence ... I want to live life to the full, not to be hidebound. I hope you'll get me out of your system. I think now we've met and talked it over it's tidied things up. You'll adjust yourself, get yourself a nice parish and — later — a nice wife. Perry, let's get going, there's nothing more to say."

He stood up with her, said suddenly, violently, "There's too much been said already. I ought not to have argued . . . explained ... I ought to have used the best argument of all . . . this!" He caught her to him and kissed her passionately. He was willing her to let her defences

down, to respond as she had done years ago in the first delight of finding each other.

He found no response at all.

He let her go, stood looking down on her. "Well, that was most convincing," he said wryly. Then, "It's Dougal MacNab, is it?"

Oh, the relief to be able to put it in to words for once.

"Yes, it's Dougal MacNab, But because I think he's the sort of minister this world needs ... a pastor to his flock, an inspiration in his pulpit ... we shall never be more than friends. I'll do nothing to damage his career." She shrugged, added, "Don't let's part on a strained note, Perry. It's so uncivilised. Let's go over the top of the world and down into Lawrence. All Otago is spread out like a relief map."

"All right. Tonight you can drop me at my hotel and I'll go back to Christchurch tomorrow." He hesitated, then said, "Oddly enough, I feel better."

Elspeth gave him a frank smile, quite a sweet one. "So do I. You probably had me on your conscience a bit. There's no need. Life's funny, Perry. Even though I suffered quite a bit over that old affair, and often felt people were pointing me out . . . conjecturing . . . gossiping ... I don't know that I wish it had never happened. We hardly ever do, do we? About anything. Because what has happened to us has still made for spiritual growth. Has made us what we are now. And at least I've learned tolerance."

Because she was kind-hearted and didn't want to think of him spending a dejected evening, Elspeth had dinner with him in town and went to a film with him.

By the time she got back to the Manse garage with the car she realised how desperately weary she was. She'd give Dougal the keys in the morning. All was in darkness.

The garage door opened at the back and Dougal stepped in.

He said quietly, "Everyone's in bed. I've got a cup of tea ready for you in the study, Elspeth."

"Oh, thank you." They walked quietly so as not to disturb anyone.

There was an autumn nip in the air in the evenings now and Elspeth had had only a white duster coat with her. She was glad to see the study fire glowing red to its heart.

Dougal said slowly. "How did it go, Elspeth?"

"He's leaving on the morning train, quite convinced it's all over between us. But I filled in the evening for him."

"Why is it all over between you? Because you still feel a minister's wife must be like Caesar's? But obviously he's ready to — to overlook that. Or is it because . . . ?"

Elspeth said simply, "For one reason only. Because I no longer love him."

Dougal moved swiftly. She put up a hand and checked him, as much by the appeal in her eyes as by the gesture. "But the first reason still stands as the reason why I won't marry *you*, Dougal."

He uttered an impatient sound and because she knew her defences were low and for his own dear sake she must not let them down altogether, she said, "Dougal, please! I'm emotionally exhausted. I don't think I could take any more tonight."

His mood instantly changed. His expression became compassionate, not aggressively male. "Sorry, darling. You've had it. I can see that."

She managed a wavery smile. " 'Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples, for I am sick of love!' — Soloman." Her gamine grin flashed out.

Dougal grinned back. "Well, as you know, my love, the Manse doesn't run to anything stronger than Nelson apple- juice and soda-water . . . and it so happens our Cox's Orange Pippins are almost finished, but I've got tea and buns ready to toast, if that will take your mind off love!"

"Dougal you idiot," said Elspeth gratefully, sinking down into a shabby chair.

He picked up a toasting-fork and impaled a bun.

By the time he took her across to the Crooked House, where she noticed Uncle Ben still had his light on, reading in bed, she felt warmed and comforted. He unlatched the back door for her, snapped the light on, held her for a moment, his face against hers, then said, " 'Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,' my love," and they both said, laughing, 'Macbeth,' and the door was shut between them.

CHAPTER TEN

ELSPETH was coming down Drover's Hill in the dreamy afternoon sunshine, a willow switch in her hand and Buttercup Brown ambling ahead of her.

She'd been to see Mrs. Brown and found her ankle was playing up again. Much better to have Buttercup in the Manse glebe than to have Mrs. Brown on her foot when she ought to be resting it.

They turned into the top end of the village street, though not a house was in sight till you were well past the bridge.

As soon as Buttercup heard her hooves on the bridge she went berserk. She threw up her legs, she threw up her tail, she threw up her head and bellowed. She came down with a crash that could have been heard a quarter of a mile away, sprang round and headed back.

The hollow ring of the bridge must have scared the daylight out of her. Well, Elspeth knew exactly what she was going to do. It was a misnomer to call this a river — it was nothing more than a creek — shallow over its shingle bed. She'd walk Buttercup through it. Good job she had plastic sandals on.

All went well till they turned by Hailey's corner and round the next one came a traction engine, puffing and blowing. It had been pulling out a macrocarpa hedge in front of the school and was on its way home.

Buttercup kicked up her heels and took off. Elspeth had never run so hard in all her life. The children would be coming out of school soon and this could spell danger. Elspeth could run like a deer, her one accomplishment in sport, but Buttercup had a good start. Elspeth rounded the corner in time to see her head up Melhuish's narrow drive.

Elspeth saw Mrs. Melhuish, who was easily fifteen stone, emerge from the dairy with a can of cream on a trolley. Elspeth shouted at the top of her voice: "Look out! Look out!"

Mrs. Melhuish saw Buttercup coming like a juggernaut, uttered a terrified yell, let go the trolley, and Buttercup and the cream-can connected with a resounding clang. The cream-can turned over and spilled its contents on the lawn.

Buttercup took a turn round the circular clothes-line, then another and another. The only thing on that clothes-line was a pair of outsize corsets. The inevitable happened, Buttercup got a horn caught in them. She tugged, tried to put her head down and wrench away, pawed the ground, bellowed like a show bull till the pegs gave way, the corsets slapped Buttercup in the face and, absolutely demented, she headed by instinct rather than sight for the drive again.

Buttercup's tossing of her head had dislodged the corsets enough to see out of one eye. She stopped and gave another shake. Elspeth caught up on her a little. Buttercup rushed on, a car came out of a side-road, saw the cow coming at it and hooted madly. Buttercup swerved almost at right angles and went clean through the big arch in the dense macrocarpa hedge, easily ten feet high, that screened the bakery. Elspeth swerved to follow. She must get that gate shut, then Rowland Paige, the baker, would help her.

Dougal MacNab had been visiting the baker's wife and had called in at the bakehouse to discuss something with Rowland, one of his church managers. He was eating a custard tart with relish when a strange sound smote their ears. They had both been leaning against a bench, but straightened up.

The next moment a huge animal, absolutely demented, with some queer garment flapping at its face, rushed in the door and down the other side of the huge centre table. As it rounded the far end and they

realised it would inevitably be upon them in seconds, they bolted madly for the door, across the yard and through the gap in the hedge.

Dougal, well in the lead, met Elspeth coming at the same pace. There was no time to dodge. He shot his hands under her armpits, jerked her up in the air, and half threw, half stumbled with her into the large and fortunately dry ditch. Rowland tried to pull up, caught his foot around Dougal's and pitched over his head, landing several feet further along the ditch.

Elspeth and Dougal, pushing madly at each other in a whirl of arms and legs, sat up simultaneously.

Dougal gasped out: "Sorry, but there's a mad bull loose in the bakehouse!"

Elspeth pushed the hair out of her eyes, said scornfully: "Mad bull, my foot! It's nothing but Brown's cow! *Butter-cup!*"

"*Buttercup?*" Dougal's voice was a disbelieving screech. Then, rather sheepishly, "But you see we couldn't see . . . there was something wrapped round her!"

Elspeth said witheringly: "How ridiculous . . . the corsets were round her *horns* !" She broke off, said, "Er . . . well, you see what I mean."

Dougal started to laugh. "I see what you mean all right, but how indelicate!" His face changed. "Elspeth, am I going mad or did you say *corsets* ?"

"Yes, I did." Elspeth sounded so cross Dougal might have been responsible for the whole thing. "She rushed into Mrs. Melhuish's yard, charged a cream-can ... a *full* can . . . and got tangled in the clothes-line. However will I meet that woman again?"

Dougal was helpless with laughter. "Elspeth Cameron, you may not believe this, but until you came to Fair-acre not one of our cows ever wore corsets!"

"Well, that ought to convince you — if nothing else will -- that I'm no wife for a minister."

A voice behind her said, "I beg to differ, Elspeth. My wife's always saying what a wonderful minister's wife you'd make and she doesn't know why the Reverend Dougal doesn't make the running!"

If it was possible for Elspeth to go redder, she did, whipping round on her seat to see Rowland Paige crawling out of the ditch.

"How did *you* get there?" She gasped. "I only saw — felt--Dougal." She rubbed her ribs. "He's got such huge feet and one of his shoes caught me right here. I shall probably never be the same again." She completely disregarded Rowland's observation because she didn't know what else to do.

Rowland said ruefully. "By the sound of all that's been going on I don't reckon I'll have a cake-tin left."

The crashing suddenly stopped. A few yards down, the hedge had been cut to half-height for road vision. The three of them went quietly along and peered cautiously over it. Buttercup was lying on the lawn, chewing something, the offending corsets hanging over one ear and giving her a most rakish air.

Douglas glanced round. People were starting to pour out of the shops and the Post Office. Mr. Swallow was running, his blue-and-white apron flapping. Dougal went in, twitched the corsets off Buttercup's horn, to which ministration she submitted with gracious tolerance, and came out again, carefully bolting the gate behind him.

He heard Elspeth say worriedly to Rowland, "If that's new bread Buttercup is eating, you don't think *she'll get* bloat, do you, Rowly?"

He was still laughing. "Personally I wouldn't care if it *killed her*."

"Oh, dear! I'll reimburse you for all those tins she must have smashed. And I must pay Mrs. Melhuish for that *cream*."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I've never seen anything so funny in my -life. I reckon this tale will be told in Fair-acre when we're all dead and gone!"

Dougal said, "For pity's sake, here's Mrs. Wilmeston! Now where could she have come from? Oh, I suppose it's her day for library duty. Elspeth, get that darned cow home. No! On second thoughts I'll take her myself. You aren't to be trusted with her." He tossed her his car keys. "You drive my car home and take these — these darned corsets. I refuse to walk the streets of my parish with foundation garments under my arm. Now skedaddle!"

Elspeth watched him dive through the gate to get Buttercup, realised Mrs. Wilmeston was too near for comfort, and indeed tried to skedaddle. The inevitable happened. She got the engine going, went into second gear instead of first and stalled the thing.

Mrs. Wilmeston walked right up to the open window, looked at Elspeth with utter loathing and said: "I've never seen such an exhibition in all my days. And I hope I never do again. Involving our minister in a scene like that! You must have no respect for the cloth at all!"

Now, Elspeth knew she ought to have explained it quietly to Mrs. Wilmeston in an attempt to get her to see it as an unfortunate set of circumstances, but it was too much for her.

She smiled, dirty-faced, tousled-haired, eyes bloodshot, gore on her blouse and cheek and said: "Do you know what? I believe any film company would have paid me thousands for that! But I'll have a word with Buttercup and tell her to have more respect in future for the Melhuish corsets!" She put her foot on the accelerator and shot away in a cloud of dust.

Mrs. Wilmeston turned to see the schoolteacher laughing helplessly. She rounded on her. "Perhaps my sense of humour is at fault, but I see nothing in that except loss of dignity as far as our minister is concerned, Miss Earnshaw."

Prudence Earnshaw drew herself up immediately. "Mrs. Wilmeston, none of this could have been foreseen or avoided. And as far as our minister is concerned his personal dignity is always intact. You don't seem to realise how fortunate we are to have him."

Mrs. Wilmeston's eyes were like round, hard blackcurrants. "He is quite unsound," she snapped, "always reading from modern translations!"

Prudence looked bewildered. "What could be wrong with that? After all, the authorised version was modern once and caused a whale of a controversy in its day."

Mrs. Wilmeston had no answer, but she was a past master at turning the tables. She gave a sly and acid smile, "Well, of course I can see, Prudence, that you're very partisan. It happens that way with unattached not so young women. It's really much better for a parish to have a family man in the Manse."

There, that would wither her! What on earth was Fair-acre coming to when a schoolteacher would speak like that to the wife of the Chairman of the School Committee? Though John thought the world

of Prudence Earnshaw. She looked for a blush to Show the shot had gone home and was disconcerted to see a twinkle instead.

Prudence said very quietly, "I'm afraid you're right off beam, Mrs. Wilmeston. I've just become engaged ... as newly as yesterday. It would have been announced a month ago, but I felt it was too soon after Mother's death. My championship of Mr. MacNab is just the same as any other of his devoted parishioners."

She walked off leaving Mrs. Wilmeston furious that *she* should have been the one to be dismissed.

Elsbeth said to Dougal that night rather anxiously, "Perhaps I ought not to have answered Mrs. Wilmeston back like that. I simply got mad, I'm afraid. I always think it's a pity to let a nasty person make one turn nasty in return. My trouble is that silly answers flash into my mind and sometimes they're out before I think. I thought I'd got the better of it."

He grinned. "There's always the unguarded moment. Don't give it another thought. It does the poor soul good to be set back occasionally. If no one stood up to her she'd be unbearable."

"But *you* never seem to let her get under your skin. How do you do it, Dougal?"

"That's not a hundred per cent correct. I have had a bit of her occasionally. When she upset dear old Miss Murphy, for instance. But in the main I feel so darned sorry for her because she's obviously out of step with life — and with God."

"What do you mean?"

He chuckled. "That sometimes over done subject. . . psychology. I expect it lies in her background. She has a fetish for respectability.

Can't let herself go. You may not have noticed, but she comes down like a ton of bricks on poor old John if he begins to talk about the lambing in mixed company. I needn't say more about that — it's just one instance.

"But it's most apparent that she thinks there are some things in life that are just *not nice!*" Douglas laughed, then sobered. "It's not funny really. It's probably spoiled her life — and John's, who is a decent fellow and deserved something better. If you can't accept those things naturally, as part of life: marriage, mating, birth, yes, and even death too, you're out of step with your Creator. Heaven help you, Elspeth, I'm delivering you a sermon! It's an awful strain to be a one person congregation." He changed the subject.

But Elspeth was very aware that Mrs. Wilmeston's enmity was becoming active towards her.

Margaret Murray, whom Elspeth visited a lot these days, because she was obviously failing, warned her to watch her step, and added, "Of course even Mrs. Downie said once that the ones a minister's wife has most trouble with are the ones who'd fancied being a minister's wife. And I knew Mrs. Wilmeston did. Then she tried for Pamela. A nice lassie that. Very like her father. Mrs. Downie always said that had that sort actually married a minister they'd have mellowed. But I wonder. She's a real tarter. What are you blushing for lass?" Margaret Murray chuckled. "I know, I've put my foot in it! You aren't a minister's wife . . . yet."

"I'm not likely to be," said Elspeth severely, and when she went home, encountering Dougal in Manse Lane, said to him, "Dougal, will you please be more circumspect?"

He put down the clamp he'd just borrowed from Uncle Ben for some bookshelves he was making for Jo-anne and said, "What have I done now? You sound just like old Grundy."

Elspeth said uneasily. "I've been visiting Margaret Murray. She seems to think some day I'll be the minister's wife. I'd like to know how many more think it. But I don't wonder ... the way you smiled at me at the end of that hymn the other night. I've never seen you conscious of anyone in the pulpit before."

Dougal grinned unrepentantly. "It was quite involuntary. I won't let it happen again. It got me off guard. It was that hymn of Longfellow's and when we got to that line: 'In the desert ways I'll sing, spring O well, for ever spring,' the thought flashed into my mind that that was exactly what you've meant to me ... a spring in the desert. I don't know how I existed before you came here, Elspeth, and if you don't give in soon I'll—"

But Elspeth was gone, racing down the lane towards the Crooked House on flying feet.

She was glad Uncle Ben was upstairs in his workshop.

There were times when she found Dougal almost irresistible. His power with words often shook her. What a lover he would make. And she had always loved words so much.

She regarded her flushed face in the mirror sternly. "Don't weaken. Think of him, not yourself — think of Mrs. Wilmeston! Imagine her getting to know, imagine what *she'd* make of it. Dougal has to be protected against himself. He's much too chivalrous — he'd sweep all objections aside once he heard that story, but it would always come against you. Think of all the accusations that defence lawyer hurled against you — all the conjecture afterwards — think of what Perry's mother said. It's a pity for Dougal MacNab's sake you ever came here, Elspeth Cameron. But you didn't know. And it's your home and Ben's. He loves it . . . and Uncle Timothy loves Uncle Ben . . . and the children depend on me so . . ."

It was true. They brought her all their problems if Dougal was out. Their homework, their joys and sorrows. Dougal reckoned Jo-anne wouldn't have taken to school as easily had it not been for Elspeth. Donny was a wonderful housekeeper, but she had old-fashioned ideas about children, and their questions on facts of life rattled her. Not that she was prim, but she belonged to the generation that didn't talk about such things "and had no choice of words. As Dougal said, he wasn't always round when these things cropped up.

She had a feeling he was getting to the stage where he would wait no longer. He'd either ask Cecilia or Uncle Ben straight out. Uncle Ben had already told her she was a dam-fool. Of course he didn't care a hoot for public opinion and didn't really understand how it would affect a minister's career. A preacher like Dougal, with endearing pastoral gifts too, ought to go right to the top. A wife who had featured in a sensational court case would be nothing other than a hindrance. Well, Dougal had a meeting tonight, and tomorrow, though he didn't know it yet, she and Uncle Ben were flying to Christchurch from Momona on urgent business connected with selling his Christchurch house.

It was a good job she and Dougal were always so busy, she with her garden and writing, he with his parish and glebe. And she was always careful to see they did not spend too many hours alone together.

Outside the late apples were hanging redly on the boughs, her little red oak had shed its last gay leaf ... the trees were more beautiful than ever, she thought, their delicate tracery of branch and twig like black filagree on silver on moonlight nights . . . early frosts had blackened some of the roses, though on the occasional Indian Summer days they still put forth exquisite blooms.

Most of the bulbs were in; she liked to think of them, deep in the earth, storing up new strength for next spring.

The Village Beautifying Society was becoming very popular despite Mrs. Wilmeston's sniff's. "This has never been done before," she said when they had a bulb drive and, with the assistance of the men, chivied into it by their wives, planted literally thousands of daffodils and narcissi and bluebells in all the copsy corners which abounded in Fair-acre Valley.

Georgiana had retorted: "That's about the daftest objection anyone can raise about anything ... if that had been followed all through the ages, we'd still be running round in fig-leaves!"

A flower-bed had been constructed round the war memorial, young blossoming trees had been planted down the main street and all the long dry grass autumn had left in its wake had been scythed. Now Georgiana was conducting a campaign for primrose and violet plants.

Elsbeth and Uncle Ben stayed a fortnight in Christchurch and Elspeth had to battle with the worst attack of homesickness she had ever known. How glad she would be to be back.

They'd left the car at Momono, so no one had to meet them. They came unannounced, so they opened up and Elspeth went across to the Manse for milk. As she stepped on to the veranda she heard a scream from inside. Jo-anne!

She heard a rush of footsteps that she knew by heart... Dougal's . . . and rushed in herself.

Dougal was picking Jo-anne up and her face was covered with blood. Elspeth spied some newly-done ironing, picked up a table-napkin and said: "Hold her quite still, Dougal."

Gently, her stomach fluttering, she wiped the child's eye. She went on dabbing till she could see the injury. Her pulses stopped racing, she said: "It's not the eye . . . just the lid."

Dougal bent over, looked keenly as Elspeth lifted the linen again, said slowly, "It will mean—" he hesitated, searching for a word Joanne would not recognise, "it will mean suturing. I'll ring Mark if you'll take her." He put the child gently into Elspeth's arms. She sat down on the couch, holding the pad firmly on the eyelid.

Joanne stopped crying so hard as Elspeth began to rock her. Elspeth said, "I was talking about you and Robbie to my old boss and he had a sample range of toys there. He sent some of them down for you and Robbie. There's a nurse's outfit, apron, cap and all. And a lovely little medicine chest. There are some conjuring tricks for Robbie, a colouring-in book each and crayons, some marbles and dolls' furniture. I'll bring them over as soon as Doctor Mark has bandaged you up."

Joanne quietened except for a little recurring hiccuping sob. Dougal came back. "I was lucky. He was just starting his rounds. He'll be here in a jiffy."

Joanne said tremulously, "He won't send me to hospital, will he?"

"Goodness no, sweetheart," said Elspeth. "You won't even have to stay *in bed* more than today. You'll be a walking wounded case. How about if we ask Mrs. Donovan if you can come over and stay at my place tonight?"

Dougal said, a slightly grim note in his voice, "Donny's not here. She's been in Invercargill a week. Her daughter has had premature twins."

"A week! Dougal, how ever have you managed?"

"So-so. I've not been able to spend as much time visiting. Uncle Tim has been wonderful, especially when you consider he belongs to the generation whose womenfolk waited upon them. He pitched in in

great style. Made himself responsible for the dishes and beds and did the Hoovering. I've managed the meals — more or less successfully — and the washing and Georgiana came down and did the ironing. I'm afraid the house is dusty, though. I'll have a good go on it next Monday."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I'll take over till Donny gets back."

Dougal said cagily, "We'll talk about that later — that sounds like Mark."

"Now I'll get patched up," said Jo-anne bravely.

"Too right," said the doctor, putting his bag down. "How did it happen?"

Dougal said, "She was running to catch the kitten and she must have slipped on the lion. I daresay it's a bit greasy by the stove. I used to think Donny had a mania for scrubbing, but I can see why now. And she hit the sharp, edge of that chair."

Elsbeth was thankful it wasn't Robbie, who was a jack-in-the-box and seemed unable to sit still.

"What did she have for lunch — and when?"

Dougal pulled a face. "I'm afraid lunch was late — it takes me longer to cook everything than I think when I start. Robbie had his lunch at school, fortunately. But Joanne was home because she had a tooth pulled yesterday and the wind was cold. She had soup and a boiled egg and a lot of bread and jam and cake."

"Well, it will have to be a local. Elsbeth, spread the kitchen table with a couple of blankets and a sheet, will you?" He smiled at Jo-anne, said, "Robbie's going to be surprised when he sees you . . . you'll be all done up like a wounded soldier. Now, up we go. Elsbeth,

hold her hands, will you, and Dougal, would you hold her head ? This will prick a bit, sweetheart, like before they took your tooth out, but it'll soon be over."

Elsbeth, holding the little hands, began a story, with Joanne's favourite bedtime characters, some Dougal had invented long ago.

"Do you know, Jo-anne, Mandy-Mo did this a long time ago . . she and Sambo were playing chasing along the river- bank and Mandy-Mo was running so fast, she couldn't stop when . . ." Jo-anne winced and said, "I don't think I'm liking this much."

"Understatement of the year," muttered Mark, going ahead and inserting a couple of stitches with incredible speed. "Now, we'll give you something to guard against infection." He measured out something, pulled up her brief tartan skirt and gave her another injection.

Jo-anne yelped, looked at him severely and said: "You *are* a duffer! It's my eye I hurt, not my bottom!"

They all laughed. Doctor Mark, who was extremely patient with children despite his dynamic, fiery nature in general, began explaining just why that was, as if Jo-anne had been an adult.

Elsbeth decided to tuck her up on the kitchen couch and even before Doctor Mark left she was getting sleepy. Elsbeth said in a whisper, "You go away for a few moments till she drops off, Dougal, and I'll tidy up here."

When Jo-anne, exhausted, had dropped into a deep sleep, she went in search of him. She opened the study door and paused. She had never seen Dougal dejected before.

He was sitting at his desk, elbows propped on it, his chin in his hands, staring before him.

She crossed to him, leaned on his desk, said, "Cheer up, lad, Doctor Mark said to you that you'd be all right now I'm home. I'll look after the house till Donny gets back."

He said heavily, "She's not coming back. Mark didn't know that. I got a letter from her today. Heather has been critically ill. The babies are premature, they're both undersized and are in Karitane Hospital just now, but there are two other children, not very old, and naturally Mrs. Donovan's first duty is to her daughter. The doctor said she'd regain her health much better if she had her mother near. Donny's own house is in the same street, you know. Poor Donny — she didn't like writing to tell me, but she had to. It's hard enough to get a housekeeper in town, but practically impossible in the country."

Elspeth didn't hesitate. "You'll just have to put up with me. I'm not the housekeeper Donny was — for instance I can't see me polishing twenty-seven brass door-knobs every Friday —but the kids like me, and I'm reasonably fond of cooking. Uncle Ben could get his own breakfast and have the rest of his meals over here."

Dougal stared at her. "Elspeth! It's sweet of you . . . nothing could be more ideal ... but I'd not dream of allowing you to make such a sacrifice. You gave up a good job to follow a writing career. How much writing do you think you'd get done in a manse? At everyone's beck and call ... the telephone and doorbell never stop ringing!"

Elspeth blinked, sighed. "Where's the masculine logic we hear so much about? Did you or did you not ask me to marry you? If I had married you I wouldn't have given up writing. I'd have squashed it in somehow. I couldn't give it up. And then I'd have all the bother of a husband to boot!"

His eyes met hers. "That's quite different, you'd have been doing it for love, then."

Elsbeth's eyes fell. "But, Dougal, I'm serious. I've had a yen to mother the children ever since I came here. Let's try it. If it doesn't work you can advertise for a housekeeper. But it's so difficult. The older widows don't want to be bothered with children, the younger ones—" she paused.

He grinned, finished it for her. "The younger ones get ideas."

Nevertheless, he didn't give in easily.

Elsbeth said, "Anyway, most of the parish, looking on me as a family connection, will expect me to pitch in —just as Mark did. They'll simply think it's a good thing I'm right next door. And the uncles make it so respectable."

They argued about wages. Dougal was adamant. She would be paid the same as Mrs. Donovan. Elspeth got heated over it.

"I won't be devoting all my time to it, as Mrs. Donovan did. I certainly will not attempt that colossal amount of preserving and so on — I'll work out some sort of time-table so that I spend a certain amount of time each day over at my desk, so I'll still be earning."

Finally she gave in, because if she didn't, Dougal would accept no help at all. She'd simply put some of her wages back into the grocery bill or the children's clothes and he'd be none the wiser. She had a fair idea now that if it hadn't been for Uncle Tim's contribution to the exchequer Dougal could hardly have managed to pay Mrs. Donovan such a good wage.

Dougal made her take twenty-four hours to think it over, though she stayed that night in Mrs. Donovan's room because Jo-anne's eye was so sore and swollen and she wanted nobody but Elspeth.

She went to the study next morning. "I've decided, Dougal. I've always been a great believer in: 'Do with thy might what thy hands finds to do.' And this is it. The children need me."

Dougal made a gesture with his hands. "That's exactly the sort of sentiment a minister's wife would express . . . and yet you think you're not the person to fill the position!"

Elspeth shrugged. "It takes more than a sense of duty, Dougal. I told you once before the standard is that of Caesar's wife. She must be above suspicion."

Dougal was definitely influenced in this acceptance of her offer by the weight of Uncle Ben's and Uncle Tim's approval. Uncle Ben said, "Of course. Nothing else to do. I wouldn't think much of my niece if she didn't pitch in. Besides, she's been like that all her life, helping lame dogs over stiles, fighting other people's battles. I'll keep the Crooked House ship-shape. Gives me something to do."

Uncle Tim said: "Ben and I are clubbing together and we're going to get a few extra labour-saving devices. We'll streamline everything we can." He grinned. "We both have a mania for gadgets. And we've decided we'll pitch in first thing in the morning so that Elspeth can be in her study by nine-thirty every morning — and no one is to disturb her. She can come back here at eleven-thirty to prepare lunch. And when the children get to bed she can do more typing if she feels like it. She rarely does more than four hours a day, anyway."

Dougal began to feel better about it. In the main it worked quite well. Elspeth found it most heart-warming the way the parishioners rallied round. Not a week passed but what a cake or a batch of biscuits or

scones was left at the Manse. What a dear, closely-knit community it was. For the first time ever, Elspeth, seeing how appreciative the parish was of what she was doing for the Manse folk, began to think that even if that old scandal leaked out — as it was bound to do sometime — no one would believe the worst of her.

It might have been different had they known before she came. But they had accepted her as one of themselves and she thought they were fond enough of her now to form their own opinion of what had taken place. She had a feeling that she marked time, as if she waited to be sure of them. That some day she'd find the courage to tell Dougal and perhaps to risk marrying him. Elspeth bloomed in those weeks as winter set in.

Perhaps the Manse wasn't as tidy as of yore. Donny had been a little over-strict in the matter of toys lying about. Elspeth didn't worry a bit if there were boxes of silkworms in the dining-room, jig-saws all over the window-seat; if one side of the kitchen was occupied by seven dolls' beds, a cradle and a pram. She liked Jo-anne playing in the kitchen as she worked.

Sometimes she was desperately tired and hid it as much as possible from Dougal. But she thought that might lessen as she adjusted herself. The children gained in confidence, bringing their playmates home more often. Elspeth didn't mind muddy feet as much as Mrs. Donovan had done.

"You've got to take your gum-boots off, of course, but as long as you wipe your feet *properly* when you have ordinary shoes on, I won't expect you to remove them. But, Robbie, one thing I'm coming down heavy on . . . for health reasons. If I catch you again wading in deep puddles till the water *comes over* the top of your gum-boots, I'll spank you and no mistake!"

Robbie looked injured. "I did *not* wade in pools deep enough to come over the top . . . there aren't any."

"Then how in the world did you—?"

"I just jumped up and down in the shallow ones!"

Dougal got up hastily and removed himself to the veranda where he could laugh unnoticed.

But he thought one of her rules excellent. "Now, I don't care for tale-bearing. You are not to tell on each other *except* if it's dangerous. Like going down to the swamp for frogs without a grown-up with you, or getting up on the roof to get a ball down. Understand?"

Elspeth found it more satisfying than anything she'd done before. She didn't know what it was to feel sad, despite some unfulfilled longings. Of course there wasn't time. But to her surprise she found the inspiration flowed more freely than ever before.

She remembered a retired editor saying to her once: "I found my biggest inspiration in pitting my wits against the arch-enemy — Time. The more crowded my days, the more stimulated I got."

She recounted this to Dougal with shining eyes. "I'm finding exactly that. I even write more quickly. A slow, placid life was never meant for me. And the children give me such copy."

She did not know how often Dougal watched her. He'd get back from visiting, these dark evenings, look through the french windows of the dining-room to see the table set (Elspeth set a table beautifully) a glowing fire on, the two uncles sharing the evening paper on the couch, Elspeth inexpertly picking out a nursery rhyme tune or action song on the piano while the children danced or acted to it.

When he came in Elspeth would spring up. She'd have a casserole ready, or a huge stew. Uncle Ben and Uncle Timothy never let her do the dishes at night. They did them while she bathed the children, supervised their homework, heard spelling, reading, poetry, read them a story, and got them off to bed.

Dougal had told the parish she wouldn't have much time now to go visiting with him, but it was a losing battle. Elspeth found it hard to say no. Besides, she was gathering together material for a history of Fair-acre and visiting was a happy hunting-ground for material.

Somehow the pattern of life seemed fair, even if not perfect. But she felt now that her long apprenticeship to pain and loneliness was coming to an end.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHE was sitting on the back veranda with Robbie. He was sorting out coloured feathers and she was stitching them on to an Indian suit she had made out of sacking.

"Wasn't it providential that the chicks went into such a heavy moult?" said Robbie conversationally.

Elsbeth agreed, reserving to herself the right to wonder if the hens felt the same. They did look pinched and cold.

Robbie passed over some bright ones from the Rhode Island Reds. He said suddenly, "Elsbeth, how good's prayer?"

Elsbeth said warily: "What do you mean, exactly, Rob?"

"Well, does it work? Seems daft to me. If Mr. MacKinnon wants rain for his feed and I want it fine for a picnic and we both pray about it it's going to put God in a fix, isn't it?"

"Then if you've reasoned that one out, Robbie, I think you've answered yourself. That we're meant to pray about things that are more important, than the weather."

"Yep, I expect so. It's a funny business, isn't it?"

"Only because sometimes God has to say no, just as mothers and fathers have to — for our own good. Look at it this way, Robbie. When you and Jo-anne go off to school dental clinic I always pray that it won't hurt too much. But I wouldn't feel I had a right to pray that way if I didn't stand over you every night to make sure you cleaned your teeth."

Robbie considered that. "Gee, that's pretty logical, isn't it? Oh, Elsbeth, don't sew that black feather in there. I nearly forgot, shiver

me timbers. Uncle Ben promised me a beaut feather ... he got it in the West Indies . . . it's all red and blue and he says it'll look swell bang in the middle of my headdress. I'll just get it."

He stood up, scattering feathers everywhere, flung his arms round Elspeth, gave her a hug, disappeared in the direction of the study which was the shortest cut to the Crooked House-

Elspeth looked up to see Dougal watching her from outside with that in his eyes that made her look hastily away.

He bent over her, said, "Quite a theologian, aren't you? No wonder I love you," and he dropped the lightest of kisses on her hair.

"Dougal! Not on the back veranda!"

"These restrictions!" He sighed. "Not in the fowl-run, you said once before and you won't trust yourself with me in the moonlight. . . ever." And he went on.

It had been an idyllic Saturday, Indian summer weather with a sky of deep blue flecked with fleecy clouds of dazzling white. Dougal's study hours had been uninterrupted, Uncle Tim and Uncle Ben had gone off to the cottage at Karitane to work on the boat they were building for next- year's holidays. They'd got home for dinner, well content with their day's work.

Elspeth had the unusual felicity of knowing everything was ready for Sunday. Her Sunday-school preparation was done, the ironing finished and put away, the tins full. That was the worst task of all in the Manse . . . keeping those tins full.

The phone rang. Dougal put his Star Sports down to answer it.

Doctor Mark. "I'm afraid Margaret Murray's summons has come, Dougal. I don't think she'll last the night. She said she'd like Elspeth to come over too. Can you both make it?"

"We can," said Dougal, so sure of Elspeth's reaction that he didn't need to ask her. The children's lights were off long since.

Uncle Tim said, "I'll leave my door open to listen if the children should want anything. But they rarely do."

Elspeth slipped on a big coat with deep pockets and tied a green georgette scarf over her head. They breasted the hill, dipped down, and took the lane to Murray's farm. Margaret Murray had known for some time, but it had never been a strain to visit her. She had taken it as she had taken life, as it came. Much better than having to pretend all was well. She had made her arrangements, had put her house in order, literally and spiritually.

She'd bought a television set a month ago, for Chris, her husband, to fill in the evenings with after she'd gone. "We never felt the need of it. Liked sitting reading aloud to each other. But it's grand company for folks on their lone. Hester's nearby, of course, with her husband running the farm now, but Chris isn't moving in with them. He thinks young folk ought to be on their own as long as possible. But Hester's a good lass and will look after him if he needs her, later."

Elspeth had always liked the way Margaret Murray said her husband's name. Chris. It always sounded young, though they had been married forty-three years. You could always tell by the way people said each other's name if they loved each other.

Chris Murray was sitting by the bed, his wife's hand in his horny one. Hester was over at her house, having the sleep she needed so badly.

Margaret's mind was clear, untroubled. She had a twinkle in her eye. "Elspeth, I wanted you to finish that last chapter of the book you were reading to me. Poor Hester's got to the stage where she breaks down if she reads it aloud." She chuckled. "I just don't feel like shuffling off this mortal coil till I know what's happened to that girl. It's bound to come out right, but I'd like to hear it. I've aye liked to finish things."

Dougal wondered if Elspeth could take it. Sometimes calm courage like this got you by the throat, and she hadn't sat by as many death beds as he had.

He need not have worried. Elspeth read as she had always done. He guessed that she must have sent up a little prayer that her voice would not falter. She read unhurriedly, even sounding amused in the right places. She finished it and put it down.

"Thank you, Elspeth," said Margaret Murray. She turned to her minister and said, "You'll have your little Bible with you? There's only one psalm for an occasion like this, isn't there?"

Elspeth felt her throat tighten. *An occasion.* As it was. A glad, triumphant occasion. For Margaret Murray had walked with her Lord all her days and was now going into His actual presence. Her soul was required of her.

Dougal read the twenty-third psalm, the faint burr in his voice that had survived three generations making it seem right and fitting.

Then he said: "What other reading do you want, Mrs. Murray?" He guessed it would be the fourteenth of John. It was.

She added: "But would you read it from my copy of the Revised Standard Version?"

Elspeth felt she would remember all her life the sound of Dougal's voice. "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you ? . . ."

Margaret Murray smiled When he had finished, said, "That's the translation I like. Not the one: 'In my Father's house are many mansions.' I've never cared much for mansions. They aren't what I've been used to,"

Then she added, a gleam of pure mischief in her eyes, "Thank you, Dougal lad. There! I've said it. I've always wanted to call you Dougal, but I would never be doing it in case I would forget and be calling you that in front of other people . . . which wouldna be right for a minister."

She took her hand out of her husband's for a moment and grasped Dougal's. Elspeth was on the other side of the bed. Margaret Murray took her hand too.

"God brought her to Fair-acre Valley, didn't he, Mr. MacNab? The parish has been a better place for her being here."

Elspeth's colour came up, bright, betraying. Dougal was completely unembarrassed. "Why, yes, Mrs. Murray, I think so."

Margaret Murray released their hands, patted them. It was like a blessing. The blessing she knew she would not be here to give them. Elspeth realised all her own defences were going down.

Margaret Murray's hands went back into Chris's. She fell instantly asleep. They wondered if it might be that sleep from which there is no earthly waking and prayed it might be so, though she "had been free from pain today.

Half an hour later, during Which time none of them spoke, Christopher Murray said to Elspeth, "I think her breathing has altered. It's shallower. Would you go over for Hester now?"

Hester came, but it was a long time before Margaret Murray stirred. She looked a little puzzled when she awoke. Then she said: "Oh, I had such a lovely dream. Wee Jeannie was there, playing in a field." She looked at Dougal. "I remember at Ewen Sinclair's funeral you said in a prayer, 'where all friendships are knitted up.' How true. I grieved terribly when wee Jeannie died. I used to pray that some day God would take that ache from my heart. It was almost a physical pain. It's a terrible loss when you lose a child . . . flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone ... but that ache's gone now. I'll be seeing her soon. I'll be able to catch up on the lovely lost years of her childhood. But you won't be long, will you, Chris?"

He somehow found words, words that did not Shake. "I'll not be long, lass."

She smiled at him in a way that isolated them in a world of two.

"And never remember any word you ever said to me in anger, Chris. I said many more to you. I had a hasty tongue when we were first married. But the words of love far outnumbered the others. And we had some grand makings-up."

"Aye, that we did, Margaret." He was entirely unembarrassed.

She fell asleep, smiling.

For a long time there was no sound in the room save their breathing and the settling of embers in the fireplace.

Suddenly a wind sprang up in the aspen poplars close to the house, Margaret Murray opened her eyes, looked at the window, said in a glad, strong voice, "Oh, it's morning ... a *lovely* morning!"

They all looked at the window, saw only darkness there. But Margaret Murray's soul, renewed and vigorous, had found morning, and dewy meadows . . . and they all of them felt that beside the One who had come to meet her with out-stretched hands walked a little child.

It was much later. Hester's husband had gone up to the doctor's house to stay there while he and Georgiana came down. Georgiana who had been a nurse, was to perform the last beloved offices for a long-loved friend.

Dougal had comforted the family, Elspeth and Hester had made tea, and now Elspeth and Dougal were going home in the darkest hour.

As they came through the Dene, sharing silence, not speech, Dougal glanced up, said, "Elspeth, I believe it's near dawn. I'd like to watch it break."

He gave her his hand. They crested the hill, came to stand by the rock formation, Lot's Wife.

Across the Taieri Plain there was a faint light over Saddle Hill. One by one the stars paled, disappeared. The world looked sad and grey and old. Then suddenly a ray appeared in the sky, then more, great beams of light, first pale gold, then fiery gold. The sky turned azure, the clouds took on silver linings, then flushed to rose and coral and flame. They stood looking, caught in a spell.

How long they stood there she did not know. Then Dougal turned to smile down on her.

She said, "Dougal, how are you going to face your day? It's your big Sunday .. . four services. And Bible class before evening worship. And you've had no sleep. Even your Monday is taken up — there's that one-day ministers' retreat at Knox College to hear that chap from Tasmania, isn't there?"

He said slowly, "I think the inspiration of Margaret Murray's passing would take me through a year of sleepless Saturday nights. Though I'll probably fall asleep in the lectures tomorrow. They're continuing Monday night too. And Tuesday morning is the funeral. We'll go home now, every bit of our today belongs to other people, and tomorrow and half the next day, but Tuesday afternoon is going to be ours! Margaret Murray desired a happy ending for us, you know."

"Yes, Dougal."

She would do nothing to disturb that exalted look on Dougal's face, it was all that would carry him through this day ... a day that belonged to his parishioners. People whose spiritual needs were his concern. He was the shepherd of his flock.

Hand-locked, they moved down the hillside, through Liberty Wood, taking a short cut to the Manse.

It was a pity it took them past the end of Wilmeston's homestead property and that Mrs. Wilmeston had got up to investigate a noise. As she shut the pantry window she saw them.

Both Elspeth and Dougal were tired on the Monday, but there was something about them that made Uncle Timothy smile. He felt things

were moving steadily to a climax. Dougal got straight away after breakfast to Knox College and everyone was asleep when he got home.

They were breakfasting on Tuesday when the phone rang. Elspeth answered it at the dining-room extension. She turned, said to Dougal, "It's a person-to-person call from Wellington for you." Back into the mouthpiece she said to the operator, "Mr. MacNab is coming now." . Dougal's voice sounded first dismayed, then resigned. "I'll admit it's far from convenient, Ralph, but I won't let you down. But I must be back here Thursday night or Friday morning. I'll try for a plane this afternoon. That's the best I can do, I've a funeral at eleven."

He hung up, said to them all, but with his eyes on Elspeth's face, "I'm afraid I'm going to be away most of the week. There are some meetings on in Wellington. Special chaplaincy to the Forces lectures. Dave MacIndoe, chaplain to the Navy, is down with — of all things — mumps! They've got someone from the Army and from the Air Force, and I was the only other one available — because of my spell with the Navy."

Elspeth knew a wave of disappointment. How cruel that just when she had made up her mind that her past no longer mattered so much that Dougal wasn't going to wait any longer, he had to go away. Never mind, these things just happened, and it would make no difference eventually.

She snapped out of her reverie. "Dougal, have you anything already prepared? I mean if the first meeting is tonight — it sounded like that from what you said — what chance will you have? The flight's too short to give you time to do it, and besides you might get a chatty seat-mate. If I try for reservations for you, and pack your bag, could you go into your study right away?"

He finished his tea in one gulp. "Good girl! That'll give me a couple of hours." He flicked her cheek as he passed on his way.

She was to run Dougal to Momona, a short distance away. She hoped he wouldn't try to cram what he had to say into that short time. She got a flight late in the afternoon. Dougal retired to his study again immediately after the funeral. She took his lunch in to him. There was to be a panel discussion which would be televised, and Dougal had to be sure of his facts and figures.

Elsbeth had the car waiting at the gate, his case in the boot. As Dougal came out two small figures rounded the corner from school, coming at top speed. Robbie and Jo-anne.

Robbie beamed as they made it. "Gosh, what a rush! We're coming with you."

Dougal looked things unlawful to be uttered, but Elspeth was relieved. Much better to talk things out in leisurely fashion when he came home. Hers was a long story. She said, "Sure thing. In you get." She said to Dougal, "Uncle Tim's just inside. Sing out to him that the children are with us, would you?"

There was little time before the passengers for the flight were called. Dougal swung Jo-anne up, kissed her, shook Robbie's hand, said, "Take care of them all at home, Robbie."

He seized Elspeth's hands in his, said, squeezing them hard, his eyes holding hers. "It won't always be rush and bustle, Elspeth. We'll find some time to ourselves when I get back. The time has come for capitulation. Goodbye."

They were finishing dinner that night when Robbie said to Uncle Tim, "What's capitulation, Uncle?"

Uncle Tim stared at his great-nephew. What a word for a boy just turned eight! "Capitulation? It means surrender, Robbie. Usually in war when one side gives in to the other."

Robbie lifted his angel-face towards Elspeth, "What war did Uncle Dougal mean, Elspeth?"

Elspeth shot to her feet, grabbing some plates, turned her back and disappeared towards the kitchen. "I've no idea," she said over her shoulder. It was some time before she came back.

Uncle Tim, all unknowing, said to Robbie, "How did Dougal use it, Rob?"

"He just said: 'The time has come for capitulation.' Would it be something exciting he heard on the news?"

Uncle Tim's lips twitched. He exchanged a knowing glance with Uncle Ben. "Yes, that would be it. Something he would hear on the news."

"Well, what war *was* it? I've got to give a morning talk at school tomorrow. I thought it might be something exciting."

Uncle Tim said hastily, "Well. I didn't hear it. But there's something in the morning paper about the latest space capsule — if that's any help."

When the children -were in bed Uncle Ben said to Uncle Tim, "Looks as if things are coming to a head. Time they did. I think my niece has got things in perspective now. It was that other parson put her off. But he's a cat of another breed from Dougal. A real piker. She made me promise I'd not shove my oar in, said I was biased in

her favour, but that's a lot of tommyrot, and if she doesn't come clean with Dougal soon, be hanged to the promise, *I'll* tell him."

Uncle Tim said, "I'm almost sure she's made up her own mind. Better that way perhaps. Looks as if before long I'll be shifting across to the Crooked House, eh?"

"Aye. It'll be fine. We'll be able to spend much more time on the boat. No need to come dashing back at nights then."

They shut up as Elspeth came in and got out their chessboard.

Elspeth had a grand slam on the house, polishing and scrubbing and cleaning windows. She couldn't settle to writing, and anyway it would leave her more free for Dougal's return.

She was glad things were so spotless when she saw Mrs. Wilmeston coming round the house. Last time she had called she had spent most of her time gazing at the dust on the rungs of the dining chairs and had caught Elspeth with nothing in the tins but five stale queen cakes and some bought biscuits and had said, "They *must* miss Mrs. Donovan!"

Today she could meet her with confidence. She'd even just renewed the flowers in the vases. Winter jessamine was blooming goldenly in the garden, the little purple iris *stylosa* was out and for the rest she had gathered hawthorn berries and larch 'twigs which, placed in water in a sunny window, would put out delicate green leaf-buds soon. There were fresh scones, scarcely cool, oat-cakes, lemon-honey tarts topped with cream, and a gingerbread she was quite pleased with. Her earlier ones had been failures and it was Dougal's favourite. Elspeth almost purred.

Really Mrs. Wilmeston was quite amiable today. They talked about the weather, the coming Winter Fair in aid of redecorating the church

interior, how nice it was to have all the road tar-sealed from town now, and the best way to preserve beans. Mrs. Wilmeston always knew the best way to do everything, so it was quite safe to ask advice.

Elspeth let everything controversial go. How nice if she could report to Dougal that for once everything had been sweet harmony. Elspeth congratulated her on the floral arrangements in church last Sunday. She really was an artist with flowers. Hope was flowering so freely in Elspeth's breast that she thought, given time, even Mrs. Wilmeston might accept her as a minister's wife.

Then Mrs. Wilmeston said repressibly: "What a pity Mr. MacNab saw fit to go away this week. The visiting gets so far behind. I always think a man's first duty is to his parish."

Elspeth said very quietly, "But not his only duty, Mrs. Wilmeston. The panel he is on is to be televised. That way the church reaches the man in the street as well as the man in the pew. I think any Church that is interested only in its own affairs and isn't prepared to sacrifice a little for the broader work of the church is failing in its duty. Just as we can't keep all our money in these parishes that are well established but have to assist young causes in new -housing areas."

Mrs. Wilmeston tightened her lips, something she'd had a lot of practice in. "I've always believed in charity beginning at home."

It was no good. Elspeth was no fence-sitter. "It begins at home, yes, but it shouldn't end at home. If it did, then we'd never get round to giving to missions or to helping feed the hungry peoples of the world."

Mrs. Wilmeston couldn't say a thing to that. With all her faults she was a great supporter of missions. She looked round and her eye fell on a photograph of Dougal. She rose, picked it up, studied it closely,

looked at Elspeth and said: "You know, it is odd, but I can never see an atom of family likeness between you and Mrs. McNab!"

Elspeth decided absolute candour, not evasion, was the right course. "There couldn't be, Mrs. Wilmeston. There's no blood-tie. It's a connection by marriage only. Dougal's cousin is also my cousin. It's no closer than that. We'd never met till I'd bought my house and we realised we were connected through Meg."

A gleam of triumph shot into the Wilmeston eye. But she leaned forward, patted Elspeth's knee and said sweetly, "Now, my dear, I'm a lot older than you and I think in your position you need someone to advise you. When we are young we don't always realise what awkward positions we can get ourselves into."

Elspeth regarded her warily. She preferred Mrs. Wilmeston tart rather than sweet. She was even more objectionable smarmy.

Mrs. Wilmeston went on, "I know your motives in taking on Mrs. Donovan's position must have been of the kindest," (she sounded as if she were making a great concession) "but I hardly think you realise what an invidious position you've put our minister in. He's a young, single man, you know, and you are a young, single woman. People talk."

Elspeth reminded herself not to lose her temper.

Instead she said quiet gently, "Mrs. Wilmeston, I can't believe that anyone in this parish is talking. They all seemed to think it was a natural thing for me to do, look after the children, when Mrs. Donovan left. You'll have noticed, no doubt, that gossip dies away, always in the Reverend Timothy MacMaster's presence? It just can't flourish. Well, while he is in this house, there can't be any talk . . . and there *are* two motherless children who must be looked after. And not only looked after but *loved*. All children need love. Not just well-

filled tummies and a clean home. I don't talk glibly about guidance, but I honestly think I was guided to come here for Jo-anne and Robbie's sakes."

"You don't know the ways of the world as I do," said Mrs. Wilmeston, but she let it go, so Elspeth decided she must have been quite convincing. She hoped so, desperately.

Mrs. Wilmeston returned to her first complaint. "Anyway, when MacNab comes back, I do hope he'll get in to see poor old Miss Malloch before another week is over. I was in last Thursday and Mr. MacNab had never been near her."

Elsbeth swallowed. She knew perfectly well that the complaint hadn't come from Miss Malloch, who was devoted to Dougal, had looked upon him much as the son she had never had. The complaint would not have come from her. Mrs.

Wilmeston had probably said: "Has the minister been to see you this week?" then had twisted the reply for her own ends. Half-truths were horrible.

She said demurely, "Was it early Thursday afternoon you were there?"

"Yes, just after lunch. I was having a very busy day, but I never neglect anything I feel to be my duty."

"Then if you had stayed on you'd have met Mr. McNab and Mr. MacMaster. Uncle Tim read to Miss Malloch while Dougal dug her little vegetable patch so the frost could get at it."

Elsbeth was so pleased with this that she was sweetness itself to Mrs. Wilmeston the rest of the visit. She put out the best white embroidered cloth for afternoon tea, something of everything she had

baked, remembered Mrs. Wilmeston took sugar but no milk, and in short behaved like a perfect minister's helpmeet. She was thankful the children were going to the doctor's after school to play with Diana and the adorable twins. Robbie always dropped clangers in the Wilmeston presence.

Determined not to be lacking in any courtesy, she accompanied her guest to the gate, picked her a bunch of the iris *stylosa* and was bidding her goodbye over the picket gate when Mrs. Wilmeston delivered her parting shot.

"I do wish you'd tell Mr. MacNab that several of his parishioners don't approve of him being so friendly with Father O'More. After all, some of our forefathers died for our Protestant Faith."

Elsbeth saw red. "And some of the ancestors of the nice Catholics in this village died for *their* faith too, I don't think anybody's copybook was clean in that strife! And it's time it was all forgotten and forgiven. I'm a strong Protestant myself, but I've no patience with this sort of thing. Honestly, it makes me sick! I do believe there are some people who think *they'll* go to Heaven and that people like Father Damien of the leper colony and St. Francis of Assisi will be shut out. There's a big shock ahead of you inside the pearly gates believe me!"

Elsbeth turned on her heel, walked up the path and slammed the Manse door with such vigour that Uncle Ben heard it at the Crooked House.

Then she giggled. Poor Mrs. Wilmeston . . . whatever shocks were ahead of her in the next life, she had certainly had one here on earth this afternoon!

And she wasn't sorry She'd said it. It was true what Dougal had said. Mrs. Wilmeston mustn't be allowed to get away with everything or

she'd become unbearable. And relations between Catholics and Protestants in this village were so good, they were worth defending.

Anyway, there was no need to brood over it . . . another day and Dougal would be home, she hoped. He'd said he might get a late plane Thursday night. The time would fly till then. She was going up to the doctor's Thursday afternoon to mind the twins. Mark and Georgiana were going to a wedding in Dunedin. And when Dougal got home they would have their long-desired talk. Elspeth felt quite confident now that only Perry's reaction to it long ago had made her sure it would be a real bar to marriage with a minister.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT was a glorious day here, there should be no danger of disruptions to the air service. Elspeth felt dreamy with anticipation.

Georgiana was ready, looking as delightful as redheads always did in black and white. Mark was still upstairs and came tearing down with a twin under each arm.

He dumped them on the carpet. "There you are . . . and heaven help you! They're at the worst of all possible stages ... the crawling one. By the way, they've got wet tails, you'll have to change them. Aren't they marvellous kids for twins ? . . . They'll be walking before they're twelve months old. Awfully good idea for a doctor to have twins ... I can assure my fearful patients who are about to have a double dose that it's not as bad as you think. Best thing I ever did."

"Well, listen to him," said Georgiana, drawing on her gloves. "Anyone would think all the credit was his. Let me tell you, Mark Gainsborough, that it takes two to—"

"That's enough, Georgie! There's a young unmarried female in our midst!"

Elspeth burst out laughing. "Now, have a good time, you two. If anything happens here I'll get the Mosgiel doctor. Georgie, don't hurry back; you've looked very tired lately. No wonder . . . that phone never lets up, does it?"

Georgie laughed. "I don't know that you have it any easier, Elspeth. Being a doctor's wife is no worse than being a minister's wife, I think."

Elspeth went scarlet. "But I'm not."

"Well," Georgiana waved an elegant, expressive hand, "you know what I mean. You are a sort of *unofficial* minister's wife."

Mark gave his short bark of laughter. "This sounds most irregular—for heaven's sake, Georgie, don't go saying such things. Imagine if Mrs. Wilmeston heard you! That woman! She knows I'm an elder of the kirk and she said she was really worried . . . she'd seen you and Dougal coming home at sun-up last Sunday morning!" (Mark did not add that Mrs. Wilmeston had said: "Hand-in-hand."—He'd been delighted about that personally, though). Now, he added *grimly*: "I made mincemeat of her. Said I'd been with you, too, at Margaret Murray's death bed, that she had asked specially for you. That I was proud of you both, coping with the sort of Sunday you'd had, with no sleep the night before. That woman's poisonous. Watch your step with her."

Off they went. *Watch your step with her.* Suddenly Elspeth shivered.

Just before the Gainsborough's got home the phone rang. A voice from the local exchange. "Are you there, Elspeth? Mr. MacNab's calling you from Wellington. I told him you were at the doctor's. I'll put you through now."

Elspeth's pulses raced at the sound of his voice. But what a disappointment. Wellington Airport was closed with gale-force winds. He thought there was no point in waiting till tomorrow and trying for an early plane, because the forecast was bad. He was taking the steamer ferry from the North Island to Lyttelton, and he'd get the South Express from Christchurch.

"It gets in at four, Elspeth. Could Uncle Ben meet me? Nothing on tomorrow night, is there? There'd better not be. Make no appointments for me, girl. Tomorrow night is ours. Saturday I'll be flat out on my sermon. So keep it entirely free. We'll go for a drive—put ourselves beyond reach of the phone. If the weather is punk we'll

go over to the Crooked House. I believe that the forecast is for a southwesterly change coming up from Fiordland, quite apart from this bluster that's battering Cook Strait from the Tasman. Nice if they meet head-on during the crossing tonight! But whatever happens, we won't let the weather spoil tomorrow night for us!"

Elsbeth, acutely aware that they were on a country exchange, just said: "Very well, Dougal. Yes, that will be all right."

He laughed. "Aren't you being circumspect! But I know why. And you won't need to be ever again after tomorrow night."

She said warningly: "Dougal!"

He laughed again. "Doesn't matter now, my love. I'm not taking no for an answer this time. It's going to be a case of 'Journeys end in lovers meeting,' — Shakespeare . . . » 'Twelfth Night.' "

Elsbeth said hurriedly, "Look, I'm supposed to be looking after the twins and James is chasing the cat's tail . . . I'll have to go . . . besides, this is costing you the earth." He was still laughing when she hung up.

The storm broke that night. The wind screamed like a banshee, the trees were lashed viciously, hail sounded like drums on the iron roof. Uncle Tim predicted the Maungatuas would be white with snow next morning. The ferry steamer, making its all-night crossing, would buck a southerly all the way. It would probably be late, though when that happened the express always waited.

Elsbeth refused to be dismayed. Even if Dougal was late there was nothing on tomorrow night, and whatever time he got in, they would have their hour. And she had got her past in its right perspective, so

nothing else mattered. She asked Uncle Tim anxiously if Dougal was likely to be seasick. He reassured her on that.

"Not even down in the Antarctic." What an anti-climax it would have been had he come home bilious!

They woke next day to find Uncle Timothy had been a good prophet. Even the Taieri plain was white with snow and the hills nearer Dunedin. Elspeth wondered if it wasn't just as beautiful as spring in Fair-acre. The storm had spent itself and brilliant, if fitful, sunshine bathed the whole glittering landscape. Uncle Timothy assured her no roads would be blocked, it was just a covering, not deep, and that the express would make it.

Uncle Ben said he'd take the main south road into Dunedin, instead of Three-Mile-Hill where drifts might lie and where the sun could not penetrate because the road wound through forestry.

By midday most of the snow on the plain had gone, though it lay thickly enough in the Manse garden. The bell-birds and *tuis* had never sung as sweetly ... as if they too loved the shining beauty. The children put out extra jars of honey and water for them and bread for the others.

Elspeth prepared happily for Dougal's homecoming. She asked Uncle Ben to keep a good fire on in the Crooked House parlour. She said, conscious her colour was high, "Dougal and I have things to discuss and we don't want to be interrupted. It's no night *for* a drive and—"

"Of course, of course," he interrupted gruffly. "You ought to have come to this long ago. That Perry gave you a complex. You want no interruptions by phone or doorbell. We'll hold the fort at the Manse, Tim and I, and keep quiet as to your whereabouts."

Elspeth did a casserole of chicken, which would be easier to serve than a roast and easier to keep hot too. She made custard tarts, whipped cream, and baked cheese scones for after-dinner coffee.

They heard on the news that the steamer had been two and a half hours late, so the express would be that much late too. Elspeth took Dougal's car and fetched the children from school, otherwise they'd be involved in so much snowballing they'd be soaked to the skin and probably go down with feverish colds.

She stopped at the store for the provisions and met Mr. and Mrs. Wilmeston and another man coming out. She looked at the stranger for a moment. He looked at her, then he smiled, not a nice smile.

Then Elspeth recognised him, knew a sick feeling, and said. "How do you do."

He greeted her smoothly, smiled again, the smile on the face of a tiger, she thought, and said, "But how strange . . . I was just talking about you to Mrs. Wilmeston earlier this afternoon. I was saying I used to be a journalist before I took to insurance and she asked me if I had ever known an Elspeth Cameron. I'd no idea you'd hidden yourself away down here."

Elspeth didn't take him up on that. She felt her lips were stiff. She thought John Wilmeston looked at him curiously as if he didn't know what the fellow was talking about. She made some mechanical response.

Not that she ought to be surprised. New Zealand was small in population. The only wonder was that it hadn't come out sooner. But it was a pity it had to be now. Never mind, Dougal would know by tonight and he'd be prepared if Mrs. Wilmeston said anything to him on Sunday.

Mrs. Wilmeston said now, "Is Mr. MacNab back yet?"

"No, he'll be on the express tonight. There were no planes from Wellington. Uncle Ben's going to meet him." She didn't mention that it would be late. She didn't feel like lingering. The less time she spent near that horrible reporter the better.

As she got into the car beside the children and drove away she shuddered at the recollection of the humiliation of those days. That chap had been on the staff of a scandal sheet. He'd been most offensive. He'd been familiar, not antagonistic. When she had told him to watch himself he had shrugged. "I didn't think you'd have been so particular. I don't know that you can afford to be, actually." Despite the fact that he was hard-boiled, his ears had been scarlet before she was through with him.

She *wouldn't* let it spoil tonight. Nothing must. She'd only just got over it. But now all her old fears and doubts came rushing back.

She tried desperately to recapture her spirit of anticipation, but failed. She managed to hide it from the others.

They decided they'd have their own meal at the usual time, and would have coffee with Dougal after he had his.

Uncle Timothy said to her, "I'll tell the children their bedtime stories tonight. When Ben and Dougal get back, if the children are already in bed, it won't be so late before you and Dougal get away over to the Crooked House." His smile was benign.

He was as good as his word. After Ben left Elspeth washed the dishes while Uncle Tim told them their stories. Elspeth went through, showered, brushed her hair till it shone, changed into her new black frock.

Dougal had said not long since that he loved her in black. It too, like the frock she had worn when he first took her out, had a touch of the vivid green she loved at the neckband; the leather girdle about her slim waist was plaited with emerald green. There was white lace at neck and sleeves, and because Dougal liked sheath frocks it was a sheath. As she applied her make-up Elspeth recovered something of her spirits.

She'd heard the phone ring while she was showering and knew Uncle Tim had taken it. She went through to the dining-room, saw the fire was a red glow, that the table, set for one, looked charming.

She stood looking into the heart of the fire. Uncle Tim came into the room behind her, caught her elbows, turned her round.

She looked up into his face, found it white and drawn. She said swiftly: "Uncle Tim! What is it? They've had an accident . . . tell me, is Dougal—?"

He shook his head. "No. Nothing like that. Only—the session are having an emergency meeting here tonight."

She cried out in protest at that. "Oh, no, Uncle Tim. Not tonight. It's not fair!"

He was deeply distressed. "I'm afraid it's all arranged. That was Ronald Drew. He knows Dougal will only just get back, but can't do much about it. He said it would be worse to spring it on Dougal on a Saturday night, and besides, it's a hard night to get everyone here. And it's something he thinks would be better over and done with."

Elspeth said, "But what on earth could be so important that—"

Uncle Timothy said slowly, "It's—well, it amounts to an old-time disciplinary meeting, really."

She stared. "But who is going to be disciplined?"

He said more slowly still, "Elspeth dear, I'm afraid it's you. I don't know what it's all about, but I suppose it's what's been keeping you from Dougal. I wish I'd insisted you told me long ago. Ronald hadn't a hope of telling me—he's not telling anyone—it's taken him all this time to get everyone together. But you're not to worry. He said to tell you that. That he's sure it must be all a mistake. Mrs. Wilmeston has something to put before the session.

"One thing—Ronald Drew never loses his head. It's not a formal meeting of session. There will be no minutes. He told Mrs. Wilmeston they would investigate her complaint and hear your explanations and decide if she had grounds — or not—to bring it up at a properly constituted meeting later." He paused. "Don't look like that, my dear, you have only to tell the truth."

It was the first time he had ever seen Elspeth look bitter. "It was telling the truth that got me into this in the first place."

He held her tightly, saw what control she had of herself and didn't want to break it up. He said firmly, "Did you ever *really* regret telling the truth?"

She considered that and her chin came up. "No," she said, astonished, "I never did. I never considered for a moment that I could have done anything else."

"Then that's all right, my dear. It means that you ranged yourself on God's side." He added, diffidently, "Would it help if you told me now?"

She hesitated, then said, "Darling Uncle Tim, I think I'd rather you heard it for the first time—at the meeting. I don't want to try to bias any member of the kirk session."

The phone rang. "That blasted phone!" said Uncle Tim. Elspeth realised how upset he must be. She'd never heard him swear before. It was Ben.

Uncle Timothy said: "The express won't be in for another half-hour. I didn't dare tell him."

Elspeth wrung her hands. "That means Dougal won't have time for anything to eat. They'll be here. Because it's not the sort of night Uncle Ben can make much speed."

Time dragged. Uncle Timothy lit the drawing-room fire, put a heater on at the other end of the long room; arranged chairs round the wall.

Presently he let the men in, seated them, explained that Dougal was still on his way. There was no buzz of chatter as there usually was when they met at the Manse. The men were stiff and uncomfortable. They were nearly all here.

Uncle Tim said to Elspeth, "I'll explain to Dougal what's happening—you mustn't."

"I know. As he comes in I'll go into the room. And, Uncle Tim, keep Uncle Ben out of it. He'll be fit to tie and I don't know what he'd say or how he'd say it."

"Leave it to me—ah, here they are now."

Elspeth heard the back door open . . . then Dougal wouldn't have seen all the cars... heard him call out a carefree greeting, and she walked into the drawing-room where they awaited her, with never a backward glance, her shoulders square.

She'd never known such an uncomfortable silence, succeeded by a clearing of throats. Ronald Drew said, "Sit here, Elspeth," and put her into an easy chair.

Mark Gainsborough came in, burly, flushed, eyes snapping. He walked across to Elspeth, sat on the arm of her chair and bent over her, obscuring her face from view, to say in a low, intense tone, "Keep your chin up—the Camerons do. I'm here to tear her liver out. Georgie gave me permission to do so. Ordered me to, in fact. She said: 'Mark Gainsborough, I've always tried to tone your rages down, but if you don't go in boots and all tonight I'll never forgive you!' Ah, here's Dougal!"

Dougal came in. Elspeth had never thought blue eyes could look so hot. They were positively blazing. And his chin boded no good for anyone. Every inch a MacNab he was, and their clan motto was "Let fear be far from all." The thought steadied Elspeth.

Straight down the long room he strode, and his gesture as much as his words plucked Mark Gainsborough off the arm of Elspeth's chair.

"Thanks, Doctor—that's *my* place." The words rang out for all to hear.

Two people came in together. Mrs. Wilmeston and old Fergus MacKinnon.

Elspeth swallowed. She and Fergus had been kindred spirits, but he belonged to the old, dour school. He'd not approve of the sort of doings she'd been mixed up in.

Then she stared at Mrs. Wilmeston. She ought to have looked triumphant, but she didn't. She looked bewildered, scared . . . her neck was mottled, her eyes looked as if she had been crying. But that was silly ... it didn't make sense—

Dougal was on his feet. "We're all here. A complete muster. Good. I understand Mrs. Wilmeston is bringing some Charge against Miss Cameron. That she considers her not a fit person to be bringing up

the children of the Manse, associating with the minister and teaching in the Sunday-school. Yes, Mrs. Wilmeston?"

Mrs. Wilmeston got to her feet and said in a rush: "I wish to withdraw everything I've said to Mr. Drew. I've been utterly wrong. I've completely misjudged Miss Cameron. I've been malicious and unchristian. I'm going to resign from the church. I'm no longer worthy to be a member. I tried to reach you, Mr. Drew, but I failed. You had already left.

"I realise that whatever Elspeth Cameron was involved in was in the course of Christian duty towards someone in unfortunate circumstances; that she's completely incapable of any shady action and would suffer anything herself rather than cause anyone else to suffer." She looked directly at Elspeth and her lip trembled. "You *knew* I was doing this to you. You must have known for an hour and half at least—why didn't you stop me? Why didn't you stop me?"

Elspeth couldn't take her eyes from her. She came to her feet. "Stop you?" How could I?"

"How could you? Didn't you realise? Didn't you have the perfect weapon in your hand? Couldn't you have said that if I persisted in spreading this story you would do the same?" She stopped, then got control of her voice that had broken and said: "Pamela got home tonight for the weekend. She found out what I was about to do—told me what you'd saved her from—told me that—"

"Stop!" cried Elspeth in such a tone that she stopped Mrs. Wilmeston dead. "No, you mustn't! I was able to help Pamela, yes, but that's nothing to do with this. I couldn't have held that over you. It would have amounted to blackmail."

The tears were running down Mrs. Wilmeston's face. "I see that *you* couldn't. You're made of finer clay. But I wish you had. Oh, God, forgive me! Pamela wanted to come herself, she was ready to—"

"Mrs. Wilmeston, there's been enough trouble already. Let's leave Pamela out of this. You *must*."

Mrs. Wilmeston made a despairing gesture towards Ronald Drew, "I withdraw everything I said. I apologise to everyone. And I will resign. Would it be possible to disperse this meeting with nothing more said?"

Ronald Drew came to his feet. "No. It isn't possible. If we leave it at this there will always be conjecture and whispering about Elspeth Cameron's good name. *She* knows the story as no one else knows it. I would like her to tell it."

"No," said Dougal violently. "I won't allow it."

Elspeth turned to look at him. "You can't stop me," she said. "I was going to tell you tonight, anyway."

She turned back to face the room. Mr. Swallow's face looked as if he might have an apoplexy any moment. Rowland Paige's face was twitching. Fergus MacKinnon's was carved in granite . . .

She said to them all, "And if, when you have heard it, you feel it is, after all, too unsavoury and that my association with the Manse should cease, then I shall leave Fair- acre Valley for good. The only thing that matters is that the work of the church should go on here, unhampered."

She had a curious detached air, tall and slim in her black, touches of white at throat and wrist, almost like a young Portia, Uncle Tim thought, and began:

"I was an advertising clerk for Hoodman's and often worked late at nights. One night a number of us did, but I wasn't finished and the ads had to be ready for the next morning. I worked on for half hour — Mr. Hoodman had long since given me a key — locked up, and along came a reporter I knew, a nice chap.

He knew I was a writer as well, said he thought there was going to be a raid for after-drinking hours at an hotel nearby and would I like to watch the fun? I daresay a nicely-brought up girl would have gone home, but I was always one for adventure and thought I might get some copy out of it. We stationed ourselves by the corner of a funny wee side- alley that had got overlooked somehow — or else they hadn't enough men on the job. There was a great commotion at the other side. Reg, the reporter, rushed round there. I was about to follow, more cautiously, when a window was thrown up and a man dropped out of it and crashed. He lay there cursing. I thought how stupid men were to risk injury for the sake of dodging a fine and a bit of publicity and went over to help him as he groaned. To my dismay I recognised an old school mate.

"He'd had a hard life as a child, had been pushed from pillar to post, had never known his own father. He was always poorly dressed, was never cared for, had never been loved. He was as bright intellectually as he could be. Given decent circumstances he'd have been top of the class and head of the school. I'd always wondered what had happened to him.

"I said: 'Mike! Whatever did you do that for, you silly ass! Even if you were drinking after hours you could have taken the consequences — just a fine!'"

"He knew he couldn't get away. He said: 'I wasn't drinking. I was after the safe with a few coppers. Just our luck that they raided it then. This has done it. It's a fair cop.'

"I don't know what made me do it. Some idea that I could make up to him for all he'd suffered, I suppose. I told him I had the key of Hoodman's. If he could get that far I'd help him. We got across the alley and into the side- door. We waited over an hour. Then I brought my car round and took him home, expecting my young nephew would be there. We found a note saying he'd gone to a dance at Dunsandel and wouldn't be back that night.

"Well, there wasn't one darned thing I could do. I got him into Paul's bed, bound up his ankle — there was a horrible gash that needed stitching, but of course I couldn't send for a doctor. I drew it together with lashings of sticking-plaster. I lectured him all the time I did it, poor boy, then broke down and wept over him. He'd been a boy with such potentiality. That did far more good than all my scolding and reasoning. He'd never had anyone shed a tear over him before.

"We talked most of the night. I said I thought I could get him a decent job. He said if his pals had got caught he'd give himself up too. They had scattered when they heard the police at the door. I liked him for that. I was terribly worried. I'd never gone against the law before. But I just couldn't bring myself to give Mike up.

"Finally he dropped off to sleep. I'd given him something. I couldn't sleep myself. It had all been so horrible. I'd even imagined I heard shots ring out at one stage, but decided I must have heard an engine back-firing. The New Zealand police wouldn't be armed for a pub raid.

"I went off to work next morning. Paul had said in his note he'd go straight to lectures with this Dunsandel friend and he never came home for lunch. I didn't want to involve Paul, he was only seventeen. I was going to try to get Mike a room in my lunch-hour and take him round to it in my car. We only used to get the evening paper.

"When I got to work the papers were all on my desk. I had to scan our rivals' advertisements every morning. There on the front page was: 'Publican murdered.' I felt completely sick. The safe-breaking gang had been rounded up and a description of the missing one given, name and all. Mike had been known to keep company with this crowd and a guest had got a glimpse of him. The rest of the gang had been together when the shots had been heard. Mike was the only one missing. He was very noticeable — red hair, blue eyes, a scar on the back of his hand where he'd once hurt himself at school.

"I knew what would happen. Mike would put on the radio, hear the news and clear out. He would be on the run, hunted, perhaps with dogs. I couldn't bear it. I told one of the girls I had to go home for something."

Mark Gainsborough made an involuntary exclamation. She'd gone home to a suspected murderer! He felt choky.

Elsbeth continued: "He'd not had the radio on, but as I started to tell him I realised something — that I had heard those shots ring out *after* Mike had crashed out of the window. Mike wasn't a bit impressed by this. He said they'd pin it on him — that every man's hand had been against him all his life and always would be. That the police wouldn't take *my* word for it, especially as I'd put myself in the wrong by sheltering him. I was just as sure they would. I'd never had my word doubted before. I so believed in Mike's innocence that I couldn't believe I wouldn't be able to convince other people. I felt that having the truth behind you put you in an invincible position.

"It took me an hour to wear him down. I rang the police station in front of Mike so that he could hear every word and know exactly what was said about him. There was a detective I knew slightly. I'd met him over a shop-lifting case. He was a decent fellow. I asked for him. He came out with the others to take Mike away."

For the first time Elspeth's voice faltered. It seemed as if in the telling she had lost herself, forgotten what this revelation was going to mean to her. She said now, a suspicion of tears in her eyes, "I've never forgotten how I felt when they took him away. He looked so beaten."

She was silent for a fragment of time, remembering. "I went straight to my boss, Alexander Hoodman. He stood by me and stood by Mike, met all the legal fees. The police were splendid. They dressed me down for interfering, of course, but they believed me. What I had to say set them off wondering if there had been anyone else involved. No weapon was found, and if it had been Mike or any other of the gang they wouldn't have had a chance to get rid of one. Pursuing their investigations they found that months before the publican had seduced someone's wife. The husband couldn't account satisfactorily for his movements that night and finally it was sheeted home to him. There was no doubt, in the end, but of course his defence lawyer gave Mike and me a gruelling time.

" 'What decent girl,' he asked, 'would have taken a character like this one back to her flat? Even if the nephew had been there ? And he wasn't.' The scandal sheets got hold of it. My photograph was in all the papers. Finally the evidence turned up that fixed the guilt where it belonged. I'd have felt very sorry for this man if only he hadn't been willing to let Mike take the rap for it.

"Mike got a jail sentence — not a long one — for the breaking and entering. And I came out of it, happy for his sake but feeling indescribably soiled. There are some people who are always eager to believe the worst." Her voice changed. "My fiancé couldn't take it. Neither could his mother. He was a minister, you see. He—I—finally I released him from the engagement. That made it worse for me. People thought that there must have been something in it if my fiancé hadn't believed in me. Actually it wasn't like that — he believed in me all right but thought I shouldn't have got mixed up in it.

"But I ought not to have come here. I didn't expect to be so closely involved with the Manse people." She paused. Then she said clearly, "That's all."

Dougal had stood beside her all through this. She had seemed unaware of him, but now she turned and looked at him. He turned too, took a step nearer, a light in his eyes she had never seen before.

"Was *this* the reason you wouldn't marry me? The *only* reason?" he demanded.

(Mark checked a yelp of joy. Oh, Georgie, Georgie, if only you'd been here! Wait till I tell you . . . what a meeting!)

She said, almost in a whisper, "Yes . . . isn't it enough?"

He said, as if they had been alone, "Nothing else at all?"

She shook her head.

Dougal came to. himself, laughed. "I'm hanged if I'll propose to you with all my session looking on! The night's young, but this is one night when they aren't going to be asked to stay to supper."

Elsbeth dropped down on her chair.

Fergus MacKinnon stood up. "Miss Cameron said that was all. It isn't. *I've* got something to say."

Elsbeth's heart turned over, the blood drummed in her ears. Here it came! The objection of a rigid Scotsman. And Dougal was in the mood to resign over it...

Fergus drew himself up to his full height and from behind him drew out a scrapbook. They all gazed at it, fascinated.

"I was sure this would be it, tonight," said Fergus, and he bent on Mrs. Wilmeston a look Elspeth wouldn't have cared to receive from him.

"I was most interested in this case all those years ago. Most of you know I'm partial to keeping clippings. I thought that one of the finest examples of friendship I'd ever heard tell of."

He looked across. "You could ha' saved yourself all the heart-burnings, lassie. I'd taken such an interest in it I recognised your name and face when first ye came to this village. I've tried two or three times to tell ye how I admired your stand, but it seemed an intrusion on personal privacy." He looked at the men, said, "I'd like to read you what the judge said."

He read: "The witness, Elspeth Cameron, leaves this court without a stain on her character. If more people were like her the course of justice would run more smoothly. She showed true citizenship, compassion, courage. I trust that she never suffers because of her actions. She acted in scorn of consequence and because of it an innocent man has been vindicated. He himself has been more sinned against than sinning and I hope that he will redeem himself and show himself worthy of her championship."

Fergus MacKinnon closed his scrapbook and looked round the men, obviously waiting for something. It came, applause, heart-felt and spontaneous. It released a lot of tension.

Fergus looked across at Elspeth. "I've aye wanted to know if that young man did make good."

She smiled back. "He did. None better. When he served his time Alexander Hoodman gave him a good position . . . a position of trust. A year later he married Alexander's treasured daughter . . . with her father's blessing."

Fergus bent his gaze upon Mrs. Wilmeston again. "Woman, there's no need to resign. You have erred, aye, but who amongst us have not? This is a kindly village and you are -one of us. Let it be a lesson to us all to keep a bridle on our tongues."

Elsbeth couldn't bear to see any woman in the state Mrs. Wilmeston was in. She said quickly: "But of course Mrs. Wilmeston couldn't know the whole story. The man she heard it from was a nasty type and would only tell her part." She went across to her, put a hand on her arm, said, "Come on out to the kitchen. We'll have a good strong cup of tea together."

Mrs. Wilmeston stood up, shook her head, a faint smile on her lips.

"No, thank you, Elspeth. It's much more important that our minister should say to you what he wants to say to you . . . without further delay!"

Dougal said: "I second that, Mrs. Wilmeston. Elspeth, wait for me in the study, will you ? I guarantee to get rid of my session in five minutes!"

Elsbeth went through into the study. She automatically went across to the fireplace, picked up some matches, lit the fire.

But it was ten minutes before Dougal came in.

He closed the door, turned the key, and stood with his back against the wall, regarding her with dancing eyes.

"First time in history, I reckon, that a kirk session has arranged their minister's wedding before he'd even proposed to his girl. They've decided that the session will make itself responsible for the wedding reception. I guarantee they'll ask Mrs. Wilmeston to do the flowers . . . after all, who could do them better?"

Elsbeth said nothing. She just watched him, thankful at last to be able to look at him and not to have to disguise the love in her eyes.

He said, "You idiot! When I think of all I've gone through, thinking—" he broke off.

Elsbeth came to life. "Thinking what?"

It had to be said.

"Elsbeth, you're going to be mad with me when I tell you . . . madder than you've ever been in your life ... but it won't make any difference, you'll just have to forgive me. I thought you'd had an affair with someone! At first I thought it was Nigel Montrose . . . then I thought it must have been someone else. When I think of the ambiguous things you've said — even a poem you must have written when you and Perry had parted into which I read all manner of things you didn't mean — I could beat you!"

He looked for fury to spring into the green eyes. It didn't. Instead her eyes lit up. They were full of wonder and joy and love.

She said, falteringly, "You — you mean you thought *that* of me and still loved me, still wanted to marry me? Oh, Dougal, Dougal darling ... that's the sort of love for me!"

He wasted no more time on words. The couch was square in front of the study hearth. He moved swiftly to come round it at the very same moment that she moved to come to him . . . but to the opposite end.

They both stopped dead, reversed their positions and still found themselves with the length of the couch between them.

Dougal laughed. "Good heavens! And now I can't get to you for the furniture. I need a compass to plot my way. Stay right where you are, girl, or we'll dodge round this couch all night!"

She halted, dead centre.

The Reverend Dougal MacNab put a hand on the couch back, vaulted it.

He caught her close, looked deep into the green eyes, laughed exultantly:

"Caesar's wife!" he quoth, and reached her lips.

THE END

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